KALI-

CHAT

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Dept. of
Oriental
Antiquities
Students'
Room.

BRITISH MUSEUM
B 17513
(NATURAL HISTORY)

BALRAJ KHANNA

KALIGHAT

INDIAN POPULAR PAINTING 1800–1930

REDSTONE PRESS, LONDON
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE SOUTH BANK CENTRE

First published 1993
by Redstone Press
7a St Lawrence Terrace,
London W10 5SU, England

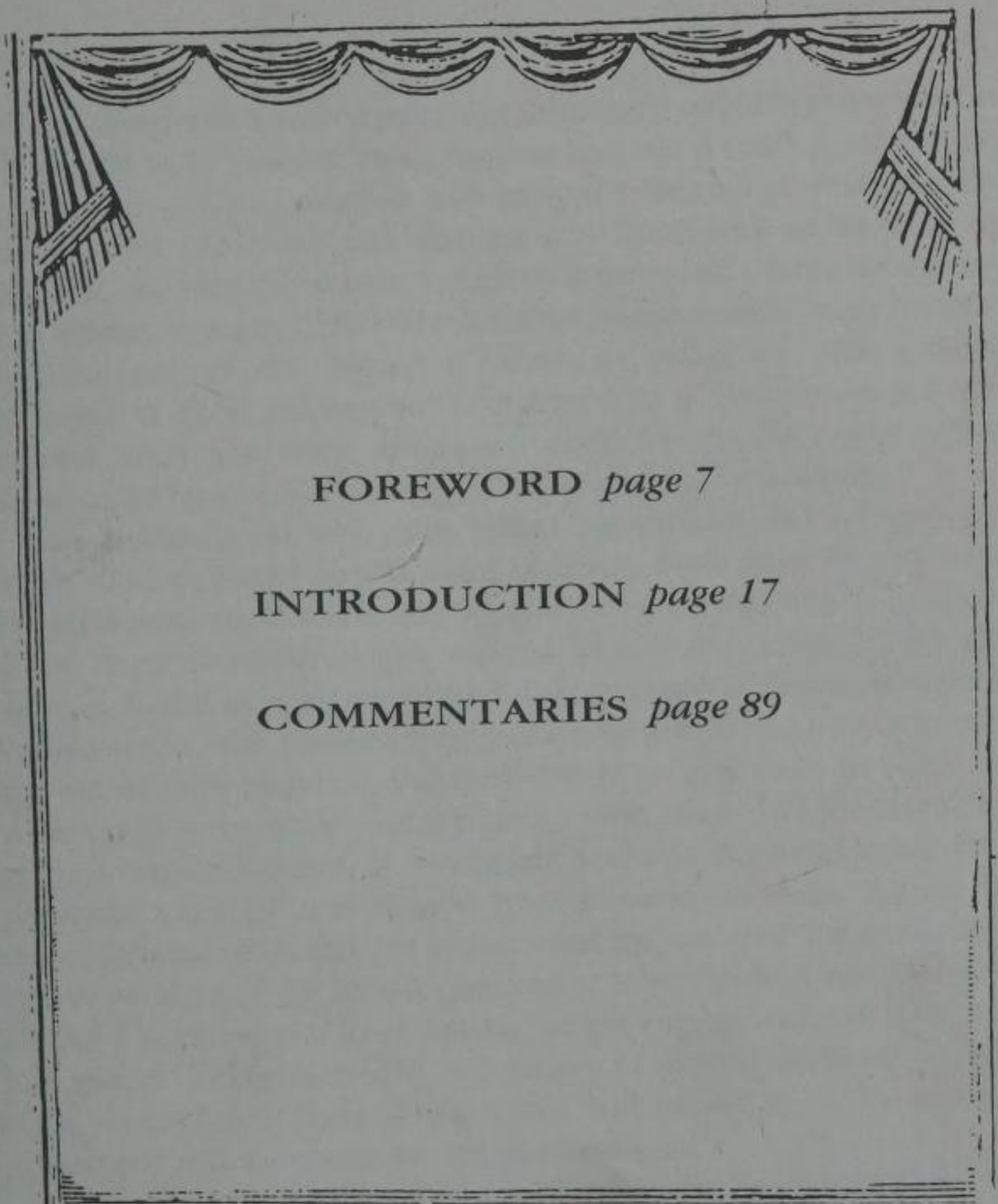
ISBN 1 870003 46 2
A CIP catalogue for this book is available from The British Library.

Designed by Julian Rothenstein
Printed and Made in China
Typeset by Wayzgoose Phototypesetting

Introduction © Balraj Khanna 1992

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author would like to thank the following for their invaluable help, encouragement and goodwill in making this book possible:
Talmiz Ahmad, Prosanta Banerjee, D. S. Bhatia, T. Richard Blurton, Julia Coates, Joanna Drew, Dr Gillian Evison, R. P. Gupta, His Excellency Salman Haidar, Denise Hooker, Miles Huddleston, Dr Jyotindra Jain, Kapil Jariwala, David L. Jones, Pat Kattenhorn, Yvonne McFarlane, Roger Malbert, Divia Patel, William Schupbach, Veena Sikri, Robert Skelton, Tariq Sultan, Dr Deborah Swallow, Andrew Topsfield.



FOREWORD *page 7*

INTRODUCTION *page 17*

COMMENTARIES *page 89*

Critical interest in Kalighat paintings developed only after they had all but ceased to be painted. Fame came at last, but it came posthumously. Yet this school of painting had enjoyed a lifespan of well over ten decades, for the most part thriving and flourishing in Kalighat in Calcutta, the very city which had given it birth and eventually caused it to vanish, unsung. Only a few Kalighat pictures and a mere handful of their makers still remained when, in 1926, the first serious appraisal of their achievements appeared in an Indian art journal, *Rupam*. In it, the critic Ajit Ghose declared that their genius had 'anticipated by a century or more Cubism and Impressionism'.

But unconcerned with such artistic pretensions and speculations about what posterity would make of them, these painters had gone on producing their work, day in and day out, for over a hundred years. Their notion of success did not include the seductive thought of being hailed as innovators by a future generation. Being successful, in their terms, was simply a matter of being able to make a modest living out of their pictures. And they did, by selling them to those for whom they were made — the pilgrims who flocked to the temple of goddess Kali in Kalighat. It was highly desirable that work made for a particular clientele was bought by that same clientele. But in the wider scheme of things, these paintings did not earn the status they deserved. Most of the temple-goers were impoverished, goodnatured, simple Calcuttans and their equally simple country cousins. They did not matter. Those who did, the gentry of Bengal, ignored the pictures, considering them cheap (they had to be, in order to sell), ephemeral and, quite simply, not good enough.

These works were dismissed out of hand, too, by their masters, the British, who, like John Ruskin, saw the art of their new Indian Empire simply as 'the art of a heathen people'. A few missionaries bought

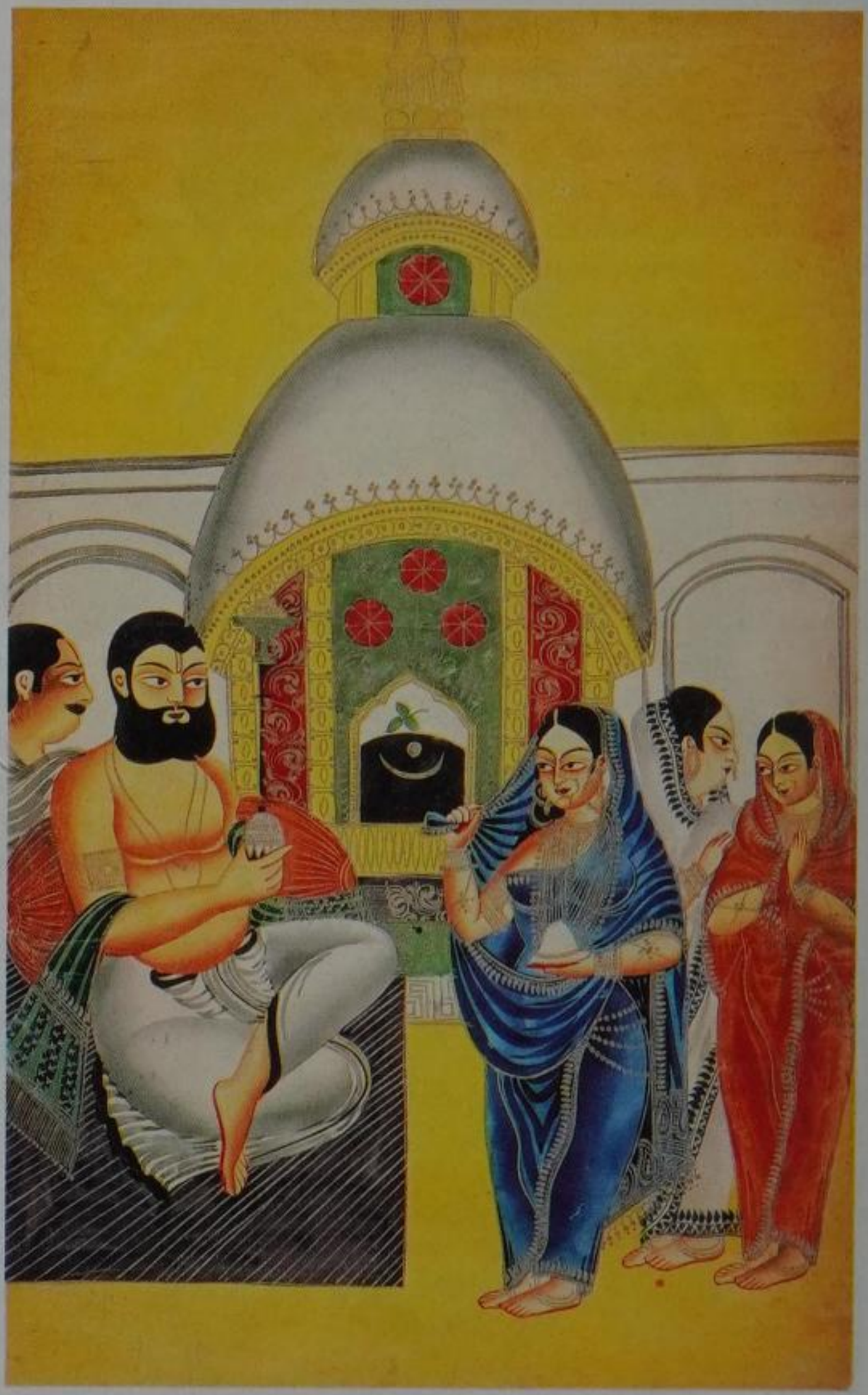
some Kalighat pictures, though, and brought them back home, where they were shown in public exhibitions in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their motives for doing so, however, had nothing to do with art or aesthetics: they intended merely to inform the genteel public what a fine job these worthy men of Christ were doing civilising 'a sullen people, half devil and half child', whose gods looked more hideous than monsters, who worshipped the phallus and carved temples out of living rock to house explicitly carnal statuary.

Ironically, it is because of the efforts of these pious men of yore, well-meaning in their own narrow-minded way, that we are able to look at Kalighat paintings anew and affirm the status they rightly deserve. For in their own native land, due partly to inclement weather but more lamentably to the apathy of the privileged, they have all but disappeared. Today, more Kalighat paintings survive in a single western museum — London's Victoria & Albert — than in all of India's museums put together.

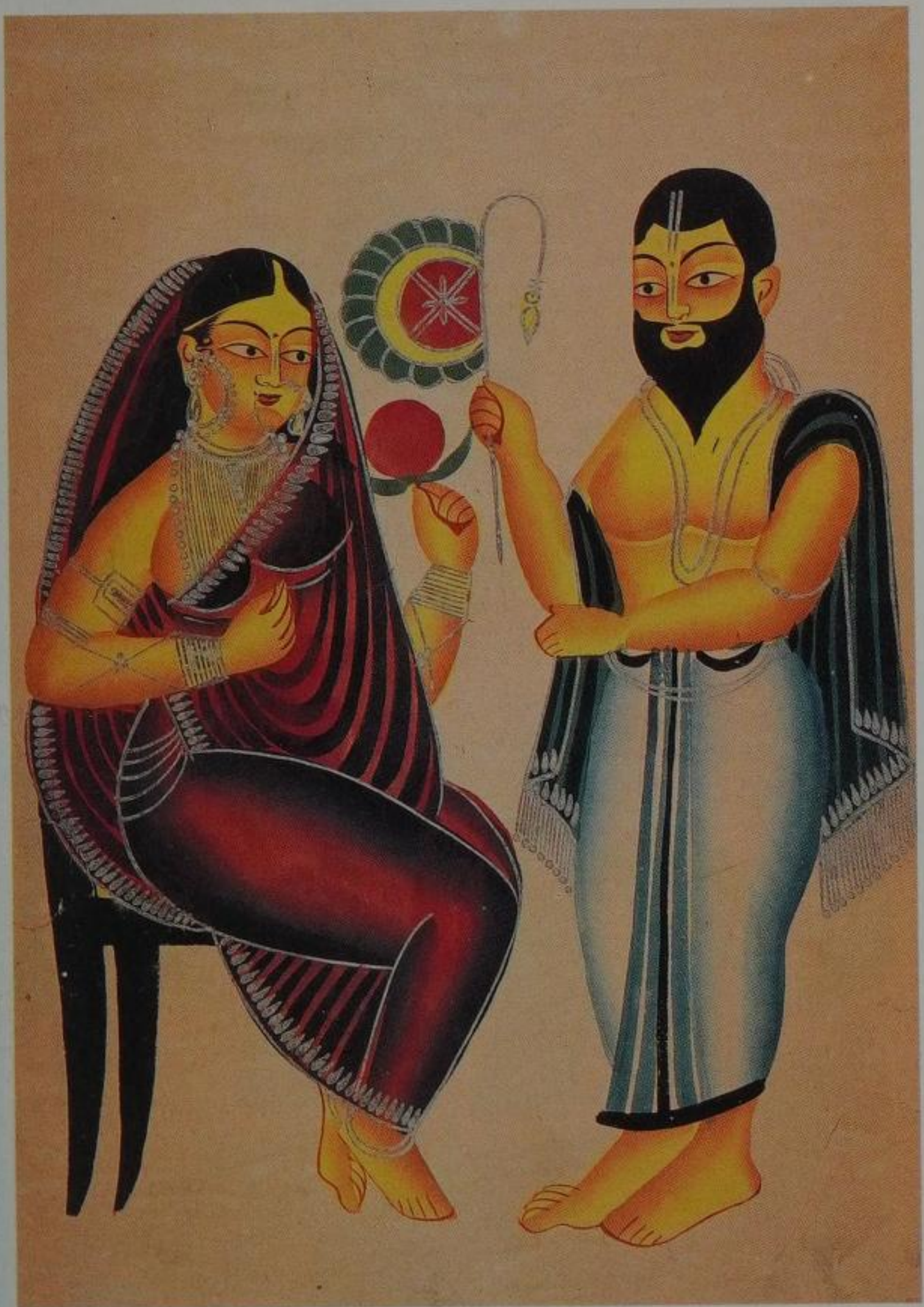
What makes Kalighat paintings so special, when we consider the immense richness and variety of Indian folk art? How did they acquire their dazzlingly distinct style which so astonishes us today with its breathtaking freshness, simplicity and modernity? I want to answer these, and other related questions, by explaining in depth what was central to their production and hence to their unique character.

Three key factors are apparent: the prevailing social conditions at the time, the people for whom they were made and, most importantly, the background of the artists themselves. Artistic traditions and practices evolve not in a vacuum, but in the living theatre of life, pulsating with common emotions and aspirations, and circumscribed by a common inheritance of aesthetic and visual standards. Invariably, the target audience of any art form exercises, directly or indirectly, a decisive influence in shaping it. So, while it is useful to know why these pictures were painted, it is essential also that we understand both those for whom they were painted and the artists who painted them. Unless we do so, we cannot fully appreciate what makes them special.

1 Kali c. 1865

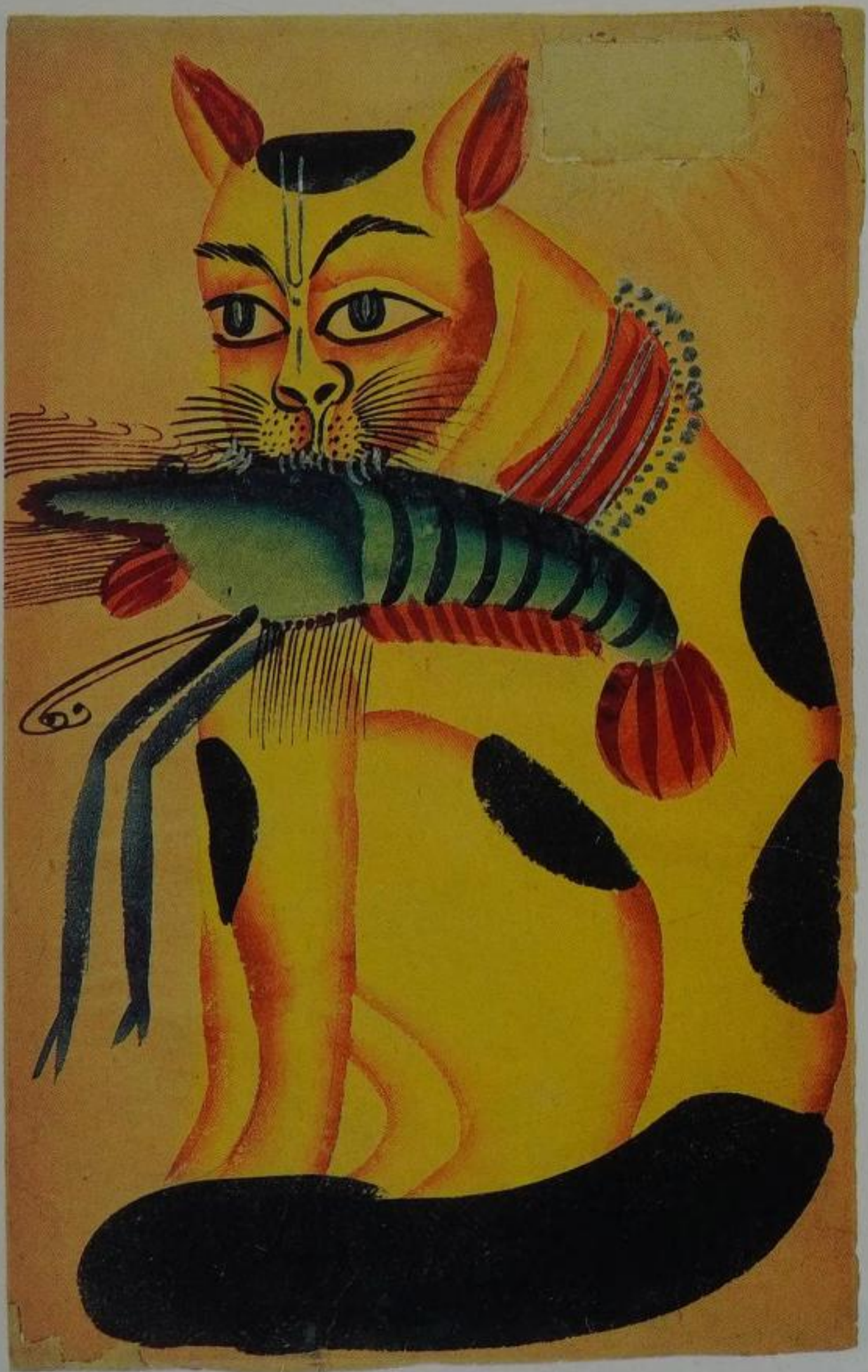


2 Elokeshi's presentation to the Mahant in the temple c. 1875

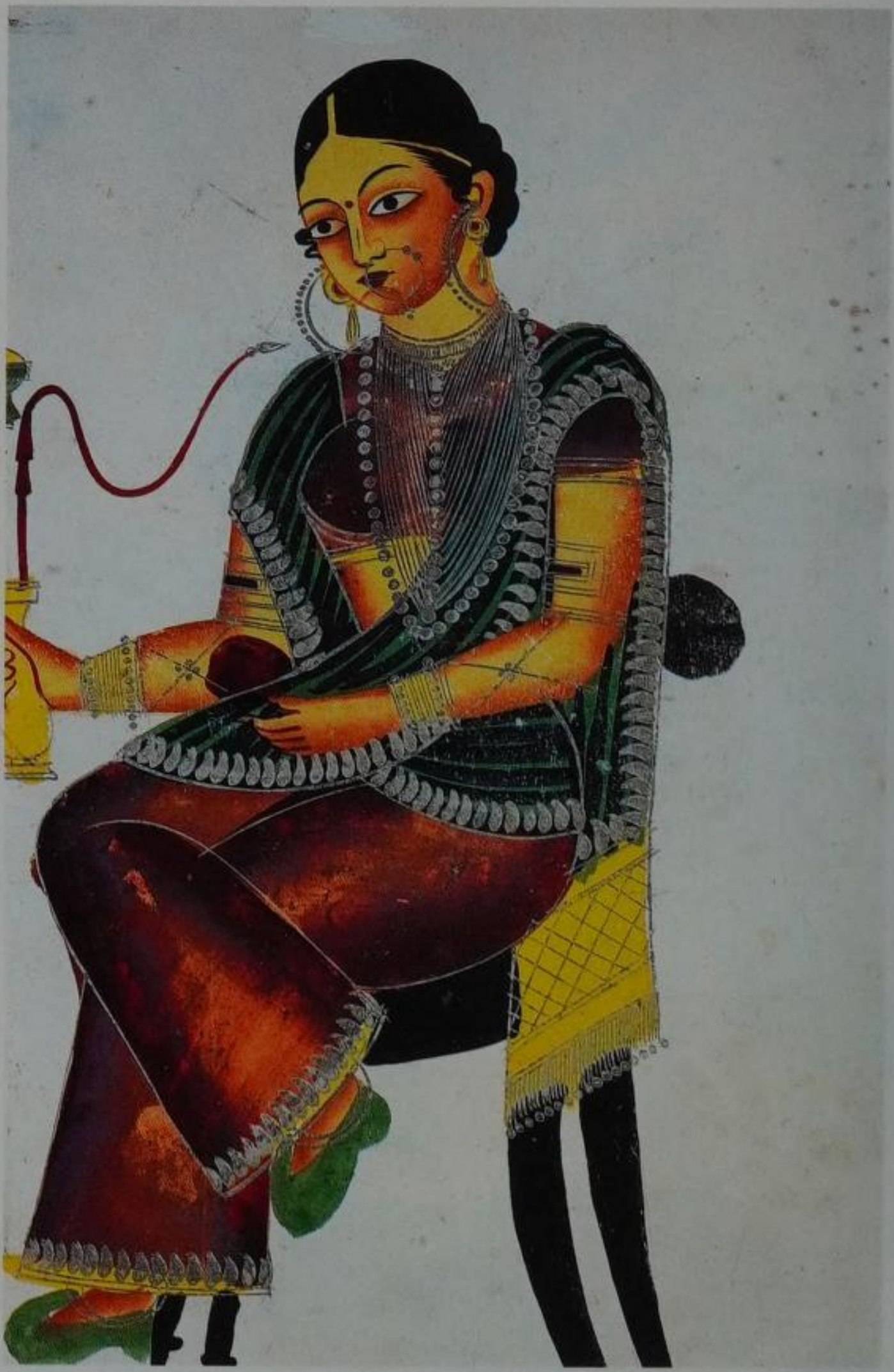


3 Elokeshi with rose being fanned by the Mahant c. 1875

4 An Englishman on an elephant shooting at a tiger c. 1830



5 Cat with a prawn in its mouth c. 1885



6 Courtesan sitting on a European-style chair and smoking a hookah c. 1865

7 Courtesan with mirror putting a rose in her hair c. 1875

8 Saraswati c. 1860

Kalighat is a small district in south Calcutta. It is named after the celebrated temple of the most feared and revered goddess Kali. Nearby flows the holy Ganges, in these parts called the Hooghli. The current temple was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century to replace an earlier version. As such, it is of a recent origin in a land where countless places of worship wear the halo of antiquity. Nor does it boast any architectural merit save a modest, medieval Bengal-style double-canopy roof. Unprepossessing though it is, it is nonetheless a very important edifice — the Hindus hold it in high esteem and have thronged there in huge numbers ever since it was built. It is equally important in the context of Kalighat paintings. For this temple and the city of Calcutta jointly hold the key to the understanding of the genre, not merely because the paintings were created in the streets surrounding the temple, but because the way of life in both temple and the city directly influenced their production and development, giving them their unique flavour. These pictures could not have been painted anywhere else, just as the Impressionist paintings could not have been painted, or at any rate, conceived of, anywhere other than in Paris. Like Impressionism, they were the result of a collective mind with a shared view of life. But unlike Impressionism, which was rooted in the restless artistic and intellectual spirit of the nineteenth-century French capital, Kalighat paintings were parented by the timeless folk art tradition of rural Bengal.

How they broke away from that tradition and evolved an identity entirely their own was due, in equal measure, to the dark mystic body of the Kali temple and the modern spirit of the British city to which their authors, the Patuas or picture makers, had migrated from the hinterland of Bengal early in the nineteenth century.

Legend has it that Shiva, Lord of Dance and Destruction, deep in meditation on Mount Kailasa in the lofty Himalayas, was devastated by the sudden death of his beloved consort Sati, also known as Kali. Inconsolable, he descended from the snows and wandered the earth with her body across his shoulders, dancing his furious Cosmic Dance (fig. 1). The watchful gods, fearful that the end of the world was nigh, appealed to Vishnu, the Preserver, to intervene. To save the

world and to relieve Shiva of his burden, Vishnu dispatched his Divine Disc, which shattered Sati's body into fifty-one pieces. Wherever a fragment fell became a *pithastan,* or place of pilgrimage. Kalighat, a small settlement in the mangrove swamp-land lining the Ganges, received the little toe of her right foot. In due course, along came the enterprising British and anglicised the name Kalighat to Calcutta.

By the time the new temple was completed in 1809, Calcutta — also relatively young, for it was founded only in 1686 by Job Charnock of the East India Company — had become populous and prosperous enough to be called by its builders the Second City of the Empire. It was also known as the City of Palaces, almost all of which were built by and for the new rulers of India. And it attracted waves of migrants: traders, craftsmen, artisans and adventurers from all parts of the strife-torn country. India was in a state of flux of a kind it had not known for some time. The once mighty Mughal Empire had long since crumbled. Most other Indian potentates had been effectively ruined by internecine warfare and invasions from the north, or they had been subdued by the ever-growing power of the British. Only the Marathas in western and central India remained, and the Sikhs in the north had yet to emerge as a power. India stared into a painful void, poised for yet another conquest. Restlessness prevailed, and the general atmosphere was one of increasing insecurity. The fast-growing new industrial harbour city of the Englishman was perhaps the only place around which security could be found. Employment, too.

Among the first to arrive had been professional artists from former princely courts in upcountry Murshidabad, Patna and Lucknow, whose erstwhile patrons could no longer employ them. Through the haze of the troubled times the new City of Palaces shone brightly. In Calcutta they had found employment, albeit of a somewhat different nature. Their new masters, the bigwigs of the East India Company, required them to draw and paint flora and fauna and character studies of social types. Thousands of such works were made, and continued to be painted throughout the nineteenth century. This enterprise was more in the nature of a scientific enquiry for the benefit of institu-

tions such as natural history museums or botanical gardens than a serious creative venture; it provided less than edifying employment for these highly accomplished artists. But the principal interests of their new employers were in the acquisition of wealth, power and territory, and no art of any stature appeared during this period.

Soon afterwards another breed of artists, the Patuas, *our* Patuas, arrived in the shining new metropolis. They came not from the glitter and glow of the courts of yesteryear, but from the dusty haze of rural Bengal. Originally of a higher caste, they had now sunk quite low following a misunderstanding with Lord Shiva, who had demoted them in the Middle Ages for some misdemeanour. The Patuas were not 'artists' in the sense that their courtly cousins were, nor did they paint for nobles those exquisite little Mughal-type miniatures, India's best-known art form. But artists they were nonetheless, claiming descent from Vishnakarma, the official architect and carpenter to the gods, which made them natural inheritors of the divine legacy of image-making. The men made painted images, the women moulded earthen images. Theirs was a living, breathing inheritance. They were born to make pictures.

The Patuas had traditionally painted rather unusual pieces for their rustic audiences, the Bengali villagers: they made long scrolls of stunning simplicity, power and beauty, some thirty to fifty feet in length, depicting mythological themes and stories which touched the heart and stirred the soul. These scrolls were painted in tempera on *pattas*, square pieces of sturdy handmade paper, hence Patuas — painters of *pattas*. The *pattas* were prepared individually and then joined up with others and rolled up like a map. Each told a segment of the story. In contrast with the court painters, who were masters of subtlety and who could pack a small surface with breathtaking refinement, the Patuas loaded their scrolls with forceful imagery using bold primary colours and strong outlines, evoking the primitive and primeval but without being crude.

With one of these scrolls in a bag slung from a shoulder, the Patuas had roamed the countryside of Bengal. Their arrival at a new village always caused great excitement. A fervently expectant crowd would

materialise from the haze of here, there and nowhere and band closely together under the village Banyan tree. Men coughed and laughed, children cried, dogs barked and the village women-folk, the ends of their saris veiling their faces, looked on. When a hush fell, the Patua slowly but with the practised composure of an actor, unrolled the scroll — one picture at a time — singing sonorously the story contained therein, always ending with a moral. This was art, religion, education and entertainment all rolled in one newsreel, a one-man museum of the moving image, poetry and song. The appreciative villagers duly rewarded the artist-bard. Some pressed a *pie*, one twelfth of an *anna*, in his hand, others dropped a fistful of flour or rice in his bag. The show over, the Patua moved on to the next village, which would probably only be a couple of leagues away in the endless alluvia of the Gangetic delta.

This, then, had been the way of life of the Patua before he moved to Calcutta. He had inherited it from his father who in turn had it handed down by his; sometimes two or three generations worked together. This had been going on for centuries, untouched by the vagaries of distant courts or changes of rulers, until the arrival of the last in line, the English, who built this magnet of a city to which he and his fellow Patuas brought their families and their time-honoured tradition. In the Englishman's city, they set up makeshift homes in the shanty town which was rapidly growing up around the temple of the great Kali Ma, where huge crowds came daily to worship and to ask for boons. In so doing they had unwittingly launched upon an odyssey of romance, a charmed experiment which was to give their work the unique characteristics we know it by today — brilliant colour, child-like simplification and the swift lyrical play of the brush, recalling to mind the Chinese proverb: 'The ink sings and the brush dances . . .'

Little is known of the Patuas' early life in Calcutta, a city so modern, so English, so magical — at once bewildering and bewitching — that it must surely have held these innocent country folk in thrall. Calcutta

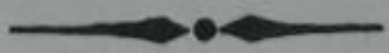
was the home of military pomp and pageantry. Here lived the Governor General of India. Here were palaces and palatial mansions, great avenues and grand carriages carrying the aloof and the unapproachable, fair-skinned sahibs and their mems. Here were new, smoke-puffing English factories, rich houses of commerce, fêtes and balls, even horse-racing and, close by, the coming and going of the old tall ships and the new steamers on the Hooghli. All of this the Patuas must have seen from their far-off quarters in the Black City, but could neither touch nor near.

In the event their move to this staggering and intimidating city vindicated itself, though the decision to settle around the temple in Kalighat, like many other decisions to follow, was dictated entirely by commonsense. Hundreds of devotees thronged there daily, and three times a week — on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, days which were regarded as auspicious — their numbers swelled to thousands. On really important occasions, such as Durga Puja in the autumn, people turned up in their tens of thousands. Pickings could be made here. But the Patuas' traditional skills as painter-performers didn't go down well with the ever-changing clientele of constantly moving pilgrims. However, they saw that others like them — potters and woodworkers — were taking full advantage of the pilgrims' presence, turning out, in quantities, cheap toys and souvenir figures of Kali and other gods and goddesses. The pragmatic Patuas followed their example and began making equally cheap single pictures.

The unwieldy old scrolls took several weeks, sometimes months, of painstaking work to complete. The new situation demanded that the Patuas painted not one, but many, perhaps a score or more pictures in the course of the same day. It was a challenge that they met with aplomb. Here they were helped by Calcutta, the first Indian city to receive the benefits of the industrial revolution in England. It gave them the newly available factory-made paper and English watercolours. The paper was thin and flimsy, but it was far cheaper than their own handmade stuff, as were the new English watercolours when compared with their hand-ground pigments. The mill paper was of a standard size, approximating to today's A3, and the Patuas

used it vertically, to create more hanging space in their studio-stalls.

The need to work fast proved crucial and character-making. They jettisoned their earlier caution and resorted, quite naturally, to improvisation, eliminating all inessentials. What previously had been said through a hundred careful strokes of the brush, now they managed to say with a single bold sweep, loaded with fluid colour. In making that image, through intuitive reductivism, they had simplified their creative process to such an extent that it made their art revolutionary.



In the past, the Patuas had usually depicted the human figure in profile and in flat colours. While it worked in the reel-like scrolls, this technique was not suitable for the new single icons, in which figures became more vigorous and effective when portrayed full-frontal. As they went along, they discovered an astoundingly simple method of investing the human form with palpable volume. They drew the outline of the figure in pencil and went over the leading curves, say, of the hip and the thighs, in one swift movement of a well-loaded brush, making sure that the outer and the inner edges of the forms received a darker and tonally gradated hue. This gave the figure sculptural volume and monumentality in the manner of Indian sculpture dating back to the Maurayan times of the second and third centuries BC, lending it, at the same time, a rhythm redolent of the Romanesque.

It was not an attempt at 'shading' in imitation of the English watercolourists, as has been suggested by earlier writers. In my view, this was a chance discovery of the kind every artist makes from time to time which opens up new avenues for him or her. The Patuas had found a novel way of solving the otherwise tricky problem of rendering volume which every artist confronts. They probably arrived at it while experimenting with the fluid watercolour paints. Realising how much more appealing this method of painting made their imagery, they made it an integral part of their technique and a distinctive stylistic attribute of their work, setting it apart from any other style of Indian painting. As such, it was not only a great break for these artists, but also a great break from their tradition. However, bold colours had

always been natural to the Patua's pallet, as had been bold lines, so they remained, fortifying each other. He juxtaposed one area of strong colour with another, not in the 1960s hard-edged confrontational way, but in a surprisingly pleasing, Matisse-like manner. The clash of the two softened both, the result of unpremeditated versification in colour. And once the first wash was dry, another colour was laid on top, to drape a form, as it were. Thus in fig. 7 we can see the yellow or orange of the flesh of the thigh glow through the blue of the sari so sensuously, an effect arrived at so simply and so spontaneously.

Parallels between Kalighat paintings and the work of certain twentieth-century masters, particularly the French painter Fernand Léger, have been drawn by distinguished Western writers such as W. G. Archer and his wife, Mildred, both of whom did valuable pioneering work on Kalighat art. Such comparisons are not far-fetched or unfounded, for it is more than probable that these Parisians had seen the Bengali paintings. After all, the French enclave of Chandranagore was only a horse-ride, fifteen miles away, from the birthplace of these works, and French missionaries certainly collected ethnographia, which they brought back home for exactly the same reasons as their British counterparts. Moreover, it is well known that artists in the promiscuous pillaging atmosphere of pre-World War I Paris avidly sought out 'exotica' for ideas and inspiration — whether they acknowledged their debt to it was another thing altogether. Grand masters such as Pablo Picasso made no bones about it, fearlessly foraying into the Dark Continent to come up with epoch-making works like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. We are grateful that they did so — it has enriched the world. But the reluctance on the part of the Western art establishment to acknowledge or admit that the Kalighat School had something to offer to twentieth-century mainstream art, or that it might have influenced it in some way, seems less than equitable.

All man-made objects evolve as a response to certain human needs, be they temporal or spiritual. Art no less. At its best, it exalts the spirit; at its worst, it depresses it. In between, it performs a variety of other functions. It shocks, it teases, it amuses, it informs. It also decorates. One of the striking features of the Kalighat Patuas' art was that it was unashamedly decorative — it had to be to light up, for a few months, the humble hut or homestead for which it was bought.

Another unusual feature of the Patuas' paintings was the composition. A Kalighat picture was called a *pat*, pronounced 'pot'. Nine times out of ten, the imagery it contained was vertical. It is interesting that the Patuas only rarely, if at all, turned the standard 18 by 11 inch factory-made paper around, even when they were painting a narrative scene. Perhaps this was because they *thought* vertically, on account of their scroll-painting background. But there were other, more convincing, reasons. The *pats* had to be hung continuously in order to be seen by the itinerant pilgrims, and since the hanging space in their cramped studio-stalls was miniscule, the Patuas chose the space-saving vertical format, though this was actually more suitable for portraiture.

And in a way many of these pictures *were* portraits. Gods and goddesses dominate the middle of the page, striking poses which are familiar to the beholder, or they are seen involved in an equally well-known heroic deed. No landscape or setting is ever provided and there is a deliberate disregard for perspective, which the Patuas considered inessential. Sometimes, though very infrequently, there is ornamentation (Saraswati in fig. 8), but this would have been introduced purely to enhance the appeal of the central image. Again, nine times out of ten, there is neither a background nor a foreground — the rest of the page is left blank, for time was in short supply. The buyers did not mind this lack of background or foreground. They were buying not a picture, but an *image* of a revered god or goddess — Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Kali. It was the image which mattered, like a free-standing clay figure. And like a clay image, it did not need a setting or a context of visual terms of reference. A picture with elaborate

scenery and alluring pictorial detail would take more time to make and would cost them more too. As there was a chronic shortage of both, one major characteristic of the *pats* was established, almost by tacit consent. Even in pictures of domestic scenes (fig. 46) or of street life, we seldom see unnecessary landmarks or furniture and fittings. Only those items are included which are directly connected with what is being said in the picture, items which make the picture speak.

Each work consisted of one or two, sometimes three or four, but rarely more, figures, unaided by any other visual props. The Patua concentrated solely on the central image, like Prince Arjuna of the Mahabharata epic. During an archery class with his other four brothers, Arjuna was asked by their royal teacher, the great guru Dronacharya, what he saw when taking aim at a bird in a tree. While all his brothers said they saw the tree, its branches, leaves, clouds, hills, Arjuna replied he saw only the bird and nothing else. Arjuna shines through the epic as its most celebrated archer. This single-minded focus on the main image taught the Patuas to draw with a Matisse-like self-assuredness (fig. 23). It enabled them to paint with a joyous, childlike exuberance.

The Kalighat style did not just emerge as a quirk of history. It was rather the result of confidence gained by a close-knit community of artists working out solutions to common problems, informing, inspiring and influencing one another.

In keeping with the age-old tradition, anonymity of authorship remained operative throughout. With a few exceptions, notably Nibran Chandra and Kali Charan Ghose, the names of most of these artists are, alas, lost to us. But it is well known that their enterprise was not merely a community affair, but also an intimate family affair. The master artists painted what became the prototype or stock pictures which were faithfully copied, in their hundreds, by other members of the family and the community working in concert. This accounts for the fact that the same style of pictures on the same

themes were painted time and again, with surprisingly few alterations or modifications. Once again, economics played a decisive role: if one type of picture sold well, it was reproduced endlessly. But, happily, repetition did not blunt the talents of these artists, nor extinguish their creative flame. (While selecting works for inclusion in this book, it was often difficult to choose from 'copies' of the same picture.)

The Patua household, besides being a typical Bengali family, was also a strictly organised professional unit to which all its members contributed from an early age. All the workers began work at sunrise, immediately after their daily ablutions. From the dawn of Hinduism, early morning has been considered by Hindus to be the cleanest time of the day when they feel the closest to the springs of all creation, to their maker. It is a time to bow towards the rising sun in thanksgiving for the new day, to take a dip in a nearby stream (in the Patuas' case, in the world's holiest river, the Ganges itself) — water being a sacred element which cleanses the body and purifies the soul. The Patua household, cleansed in body and soul, would then sit down, cross-legged, to work.

The head of the family, usually also its principal painter and draughtsman, would first draw the outlines of the pictures in pencil, following an existing prototype of a popular subject. This was then passed on to a son, a brother, a nephew or a female member of the joint family, who quickly laid on a colour in swift, broad sweeps with a loaded brush. Subsequently, other members of the household added further colours or dabs or lines in silver paint for ornamentation. The process continued till the whole drawing was filled in and the image completed. Admittedly, this production line method had its drawbacks. There was a certain amount of sloppiness: sometimes the paint flooded past the demarcated areas, at others, there was unjustified flatness and general carelessness. But in spite of all that the ink continued to sing and the brush danced for over a century

But who was it for, this poetic odyssey? Who were the Patuas' so-called 'patrons'?

They were the mainly penniless pilgrims from the depths of the countryside who shoved their way into the temple just to be able to get a fleeting glimpse of the diminutive statue of Kali the Terrible and Protecting Mother of all. Kali is mysterious, a goddess *extraordinaire*. She is Shakti, the female but superior part of the duality of the Creative Force. She is jet black, which intensifies her mysteriousness and also suggests her deep, pre-Aryan age and origin. Her long red tongue hangs out in warning to all her foes. Her anger knows no bounds. She is Fury manifest, the goddess of all nature's most fearsome facets — the cyclones and hurricanes, droughts, deluges, famines and epidemics which visit these parts with a truculent regularity.

In pictures, she is seen holding a decapitated human head in the lower of her two left hands — she has four arms — and a long flowing necklace of more severed heads. Armed with frightful weapons of war in her other three hands, she stands triumphantly with one foot on her prostrate husband, Shiva, proclaiming her omnipotence and superiority. Kali is known as the one whose thirst for blood is unquenchable. She is appeased only by complete submission and blood sacrifice — in the mists of time it included that of human beings, but since her residency at Kalighat it has been mostly goats. Ruthless but caring, Kali exercises a remarkably intense grip over the Indian psyche. Hindus all over the country venerate her and shrines devoted to her various other incarnations, of which she has several, dot the land.

In Calcutta, because her famous temple in Kalighat gave the city its name, she is a living presence. Every other street has a little Kali reminder, be it a miniscule white-washed enclosure, a misshapen cleft at the base of an old tree with a few black *lingam*-shaped stones smeared with red paint, her three-eyed black head with its lolling red tongue, or a more elaborate, decorative version of her painted by a local artist on a wall. Calcutta is festooned with her image. She is magical and magisterial, a pre-Aryan deity who entered the Hindu

pantheon sometime after the Aryan conquest of eastern India around one thousand BC. Beholding her image is auspicious and benefit bestowing.

Sighting accomplished, the pilgrims would go on to watch the sacrifice of goats garlanded with Kali's favourite flower, the blood-red *sonal* lily. Or they sat down cross-legged somewhere in the temple precincts and begged her for boons — a better harvest, a child's recovery from smallpox — or they simply thanked her for what she had given them — the straw roof overhead, mother and father, husband or wife, children, especially sons. All this took only a part of the morning or the early evening, the times of day — when the sun was rising or setting — regarded as best for prayer (also the time for business for the Patuas!). It left Kali's devotees enough time to look around the narrow alleyways of makeshift, ramshackle wooden stalls which sold anything and everything — household utensils, sweetmeats, flowers for the goddess, farming implements . . . Times were hard — they always are in India — and their pockets would be almost empty. Yet they did not want to return home without something from the Mother-of-All's house, be it a little figure in clay dug from the holy river or a Kalighat *pat*, which they could buy for as little as a *pice* or two. (In the 1860s an Englishman, Monier-Williams, paid a little more — an *anna* per picture and for a few rupees he returned home with a handsome collection now housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Some of the works he acquired are reproduced in this volume.)

If beholding Kali's image was auspicious, making or painting it was even more so. But it was not just her image the Patuas were painting. No major world religion contains more abundant a wealth of visual imagery than Hinduism, and they included the entire pantheon in their repertoire. Much of Christian painting concerns itself with its main figure, Jesus Christ, mostly with the circumstance of his birth and the manner in which he died. Saints and apostles are depicted too, but by far the greater part of Christian painting has been about

the life and teachings of one figure, Christ. There is no religious painting at all in Judaism or Islam. And whilst Buddhism laid the foundation of *painting* in India in the incomparable first to eighth centuries AD frescos of Ajanta, most of its art is similarly centred around one historical person, the Buddha himself. By contrast, and it is a fascinating contrast, Hinduism reveals a spectacle of immense riches. Central to Christian art is the pain and suffering of the human spirit; to the Buddhist, it is contemplation and the quest for *nirvana*. In both, the art appears to be inward-looking, introverted. Hinduism, which spawned Buddhism (and perhaps, having done so, shed the need for circumspection and introversion), has ever remained unabashedly celebratory. All its arts too. And the works of the Kalighat Patuas emulate that feeling of joy, common to all Hinduism in spite of its countless contradictions, simply and superbly.

Hinduism is not a religion as such. It was not 'revealed'. Rather it is a way of life which has evolved out of a very deep *pot pourri* of the beliefs, practices and rituals of numerous communities of the vast subcontinent following the first conquest by the Aryans around 1500 BC. True, it has no prophet-like central figure or book. But it has gods galore — multi-formed and multi-limbed! And it is monotheist, as well as polytheist and pantheist. There is a supreme being, the Eternal One, who is without beginning or end, above time, space and causation. As such a being cannot be understood by ordinary mortals, he is accorded three easily understandable forms and functions — the creator Brahma, the preserver Vishnu and the destroyer Shiva. Vishnu is worshipped most widely. In his eighth and most popular incarnation on earth, he comes to us as Krishna, the god most colourful. Krishna charms us as the ideal child, seduces us as the irresistible lover, impresses us as a soldier statesman and blows our minds as a towering philosopher. Krishna is the ladies' favourite, and all artists', too, for he offers in one life and one being material enough to keep them occupied for a lifetime.

Also widely worshipped is Shiva, the mendicant of heaven. His abode is Mount Kailasa in the upper reaches of the Himalayas. But he is forever wandering, a divine vagabond who delights in discourses

with ghostly spirits presiding over cremation grounds. As he was the husband of Sati, or Kali, he naturally found his way into the hearts of the Kalighat painters, who depicted him somewhat irreverently as always under the influence of hemp — eyeballs rolling upward trance-like, carelessly clad and seated indolently on his sluggish mount, the black bull Nandi. Shiva is the god who destroys, but he is also the god of regeneration and his wife is variously known as Parvati, Durga, Kali, Sati, Uma, Devi, Chandi . . . all leading goddesses in their own right. He has two sons — the elephant-headed Ganesha, god of plenitude; and Kartikeya, god of war.

Every god and goddess in the Hindu pantheon has his or her own mount. Durga rides a lion or a tiger, Ganesha a mouse and his brother a peacock. In their many other forms, they play a variety of roles, performing impossible miracles, destroying demons, delighting their admirers and providing Indian artists with an inexhaustible mine of ready-made imagery. They had illuminated the works of the Kalighat Patuas from the moment they launched upon their long and colourful career.

Unfortunately, very few pictures survive from the Patuas' formative early days in Calcutta, say from 1820 to 1840 or 1850. But the transition between the highly disciplined, centuries-old tradition of scroll-making and the market-orientated prolific painting of the single *pats* was certainly fraught with anxieties. However, this transition led them to redefine the parameters of their work and re-address their very *raison d'être*, and they did this with resounding success. While they painted religious and mythological themes so central and real to their lives and those of their 'patrons', they also recorded their impressions of the English — racing, hunting (fig. 4) or in some suitably elevated capacity — as always, from afar. It is highly unlikely, for example, that the Patuas ever accompanied an Englishman on a tiger shoot, but they were well aware that the sahib shot the beast of Bengal. The English were also to influence them in another, even more rewarding way, leading them in an entirely new direction.

Obviously, the Patuas had seen examples of nature drawings and paintings made by artists in the employ of the East India Company — thousands were being turned out at the time. Being natural draughtsmen, they soon turned their hands to naturalism along the Company lines, but with a directness characteristically their own. The outcome was an expressiveness imbued with an original wit and charm quite new to Indian art. They made uninhibited use of naturalism to illustrate local proverbs and to make telling social statements.

For instance, the cat in fig. 5 with a prawn in its mouth is not just a cat with a prawn in its mouth. The vertical lines on the very human face of the feline creature tantalisingly tell us there is more to it than meets the eye. The followers of Vishnu are known as *vaishnavas*. They wear three vertical lines of sandalwood paste on their forehead to proclaim their sect allegiance (followers of Shiva, *shaivas,* wear an equal number of horizontal lines). They are fiercely vegetarian — meat and fish are supposed to be deeply repugnant to them. But some are known to be unable to resist temptation and secretly eat both. The eating of meat in India is not only a religious or a dietary matter, it is seen as a vice which prompts speculation to the effect: *meat today, drink tomorrow and god knows what the day after.* The cat with a prawn or a fish in its mouth is a *vaishnava bhagat* or holy man, representing many of his calling. He is eating in private what he declares in public to be abhorrent to him. He is a hypocrite, he is not to be trusted. We can imagine how such imagery illustrating a simple social truth must have charmed the simple folk who, of a radiant morning or a breezy early evening, chanced upon it at a Patua's stall in Kalighat.

Calcutta came of age in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the great Mutiny of 1857. This sordid affair, equally badly handled by both sides, had been bloody and might have cost the British their most valuable colonial possession. Instead, it made them the absolute masters — no Indian force would challenge them again militarily. Soon after, India passed from the hands of the East India

Company to those of the Crown. With young Queen Victoria proclaimed as Empress of India, Calcutta, the imperial capital of her much loved Indian Empire, entered the most glorious phase of its existence. Untouched by this so-called Mutiny which had been played out in the far-off Indian heart-land around Delhi, it was already a thriving centre of trade, and now began to bloom culturally, commercially and industrially.

As new factories sprouted, so did printing presses. Western influences and ideas proliferated, throwing up a hybrid culture of a curious kind — strongly western on the surface, deeply Indian beneath it. Deeming it advantageous, the progressive Bengali middle classes allowed themselves to be educated along British lines, much to the satisfaction of the British, who needed such people to run their Empire. They went out of their way to embrace all things English — language, art, architecture, thought, fashion. This yielded some extraordinary results. Whilst it sharpened the Bengali intellect and induced it to imbibe the notion of Western-style democracy and social justice, it also inspired it to look at its roots in a proud and a determined way, so that Calcutta became a place of social, political and artistic ferment of considerable virility, quite the 'swinging city' of its time, much like Paris at the turn of the century. No Moulin Rouge here, no *can-can* or Montmartre cafe life; but colour and song and dance gave the place the same headiness and the same atmospheric buoyancy. There were many arresting *jatras*, street theatre shows, but even more popular were the pantomimes (*swangs*).

Swangs were eminently suitable for social satire, and the impoverished working class which formed the bulk of society took to them avidly, as they ridiculed the quirks and foibles of the upper classes. The naturally witty Bengalis found in the *swangs* an ideal way of poking fun at the privileged and the powerful and their influence soon drifted beyond the domain of song, dance and pantomime into the arena of contemporary visual arts. The potters of the day moulded clay images lampooning certain well-known character models and types. But its most interesting manifestation reaches us through the

work of Kalighat artists — who began to make scathing but exquisitely executed statements about the human condition, its vanities and absurdities, its frailties and contradictions, its self-made traps and pitfalls.

The *nouveau riche babu,* the new man about town, became their natural target. An archetypal product of the adulterous age, the *babu* was tailor-made for them. Generally short — the height of Charlie Chaplin — he sported the fashionable 'Albert' hairstyle, and although he always had the traditional muslin *dhotti* as legwear, he donned a well-cut English jacket above it. In black pump shoes, with a freshly-cut rose in one hand and a smart walking stick in the other, he floated in air which was three-quarters perfume and only one nitrogen. Thus got up, the *babu* sauntered the streets of Calcutta in pursuit of all that was uplifting and good in life, chiefly the charms of a certain type of lady.

Curiously enough, while he got full treatment from the watchful Kalighat artists, his *inamorata* went Scot-free. Far from taking her to task for leading him astray, often wrecking his home life, they painted her rather sympathetically, even flatteringly, with feeling and respect. They portrayed her as a well-endowed, wide-eyed beauty, much in keeping with the age-old Indian concept of feminine beauty — well-rounded, sensuous and voluptuous, with a seductive visage. They showed her not so much as a prostitute emanating all the evils society ascribes to her, but more as what we today would call a feminist heroine, defying the man-defined role of woman as a submissive, subservient and dependent being. They accorded her a certain bravado and authority, and depicted her as having unquestioned power over her wimp of a *babu*, whom she could take out for a walk as she had seen English ladies do, a poodle complete with collar and chain (fig. 57). She comes across as being in total command — of him, of herself and her body, with which she does as she pleases.. In a mildly subversive way, they painted her Kali-like — one proud foot on her prostrate, endorsing the Hindu philosophic belief in the ascendancy of the female over the male as demonstrated by Kali herself, and showing no

qualms about likening a prostitute to a mighty goddess.

More 'worthy' men than the *babu* came under the scrutiny of the Patuas' punitive brush. The ubiquitous holy man also begged for their attention: the wandering dispenser of benedictions (and a God's gift to India!) who has successfully walked the Indian earth from time immemorial. Holy men were supposed to have relinquished love for all things worldly in favour of an existence on a higher plane. They were known for their 'no attachments' mode of life and for their shunning of mundane pleasures, especially those associated with the stomach and baser anatomy, all of which were anathema to them. They were men of god, above temptation. But being human, they erred and succumbed to temptation from time to time, hoping the divine god would forgive them. This erring usually happened when they came upon an unsuspecting and unchaperoned young female devotee. If god forgave them, the Patua did not.

As chroniclers, the Kalighat artists' most notable success was the depiction of the *crime passionelle* of the century: the murder in 1873 of a young adulteress by her jealous husband. What made the case so sensational was that the man who debauched the newly-wedded seventeen-year-old Elokeshi was none other than the distinguished high priest of the famous Tarakeshwar temple, its Mahant. Adding extra spice to the affair was the well-founded rumour that the unfortunate girl's family had actively encouraged the illicit liaison. Elokeshi's father seemed to have done his utmost to gratify the lustful priest, a heinous act incomprehensible to the Hindu mind. Calcutta watched with bated breath when the case came up at the High Court.

On trial were two men — her husband, young Nabin Bannerji, for murder; and her ravisher, the Mahant, for adultery. The former was sentenced to be transported to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal (he was reprieved a few years later with many other prisoners in honour of the Prince of Wales' royal visit to India); the latter was sentenced to three years' hard labour. The Kalighat artists painted the whole saga, scene by scene, as if they had witnessed each one of them. In fig. 2 we have a demure Elokeshi being presented to the impressive-looking Mahant by her sister and the family maid. The

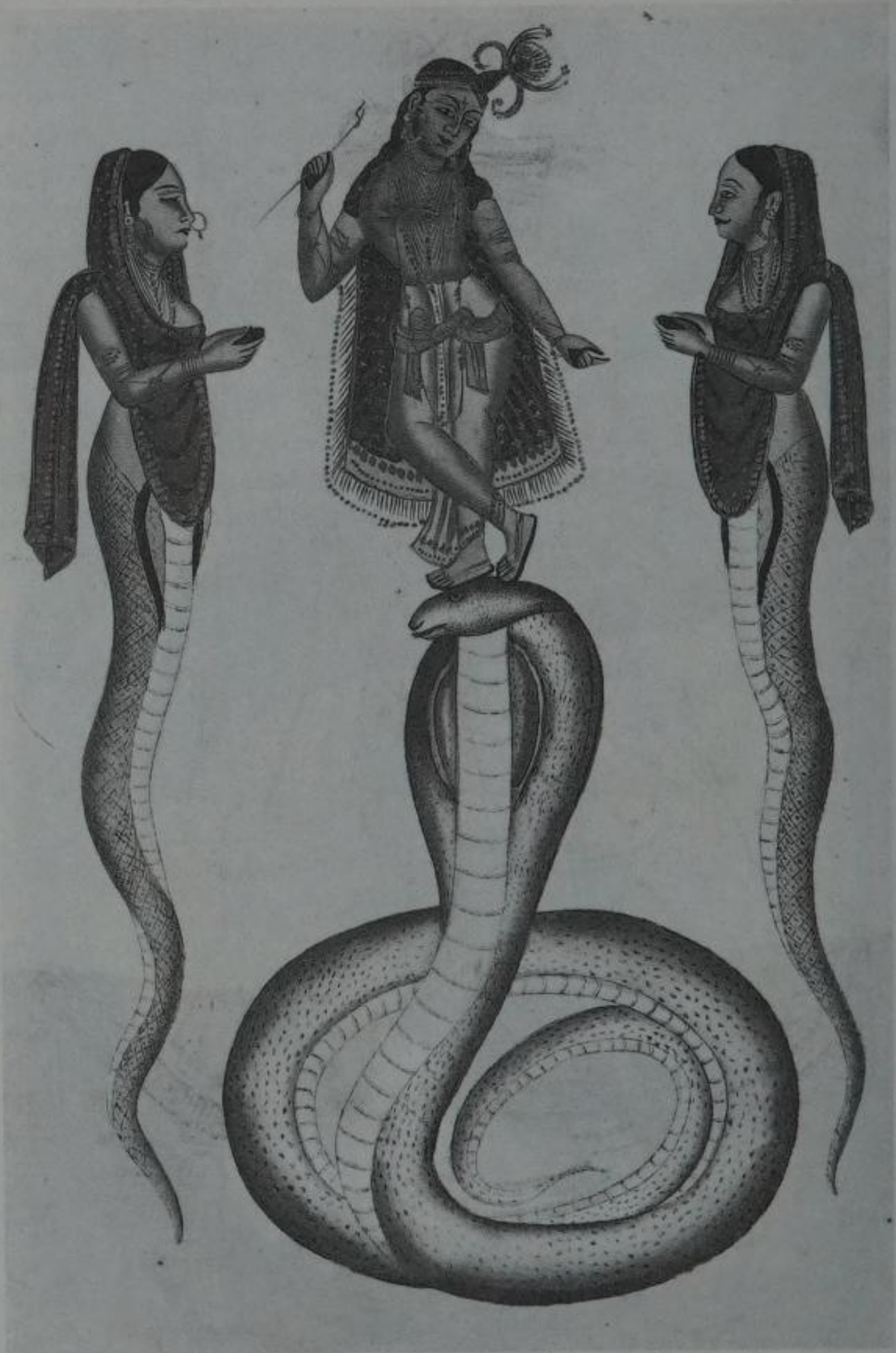
story goes that she had already been spotted by the roving-eye'd Mahant. But here she is being offered to him gift-wrapped, it appears, thanks to a thoughtful family. Again, only those items or aspects of the surroundings are included by which the artist wants to articulate the picture. In the background is the typical double-canopy Shiva temple, prominently displaying a virile-looking *lingam,* leaving no doubt as to what lies in the mind of the high priest. Then we see them dallying with each other, the prelude to seduction (fig. 3). In a subsequent picture, Elokeshi appears with a rose to indicate her post-seduction lifestyle. Then follow scenes of the cuckolded husband's discovery of the great betrayal and of the ghastly crime and punishment. Like all other earlier episodes, they were painted in their hundreds.

Art must surprise, enchant and move, in whatever capacity it can, not only those who behold it or buy it, but also those who make it. In this simple equation lies the essence of all art. These pictures must have been fun to make and fun to have, for here wilful satire and deliberate caricature made their appearance for the first time in Indian art. In addition, they are of undeniable social and historical interest. Their makers were well aware that they were engaged in the making of something which was by its very nature ephemeral, be it a drawing or a painting. They had no pretension or expectation of it being anything other than that. The hidden bonus of this was that they felt liberated from any kind of inhibition or caution. As far as the Patuas were concerned, it was work on hand. They enjoyed doing it.

But now, at the turn of the century, the machine, which had given the Patuas a flying start at the outset of their career by providing them with cheap factory-made paper, was poised to blight their future. Now printing presses, at home and abroad, could make available for mass consumption coloured prints of Hindu gods and goddesses far more cheaply than the Patuas could manage. Even before the bugles of the First Great War had sounded, industrial Calcutta, the very city which had been the making of the Patuas, had blown their own and

rung their death knell by churning out prints from its numerous presses. The writing was on the wall. The poetic odyssey of the Kalighat painters had come to an end. It was not that the charm had ebbed out of their work, but now there was simply no market for it. The Patuas' erstwhile 'patrons' had opted for much cheaper artefacts, the sort one sees today being sold in the sweaty outskirts of Kalighat from crowded little wooden shacks in narrow alley-ways clinging to the temple. Not even the Mighty Kali could help them combat the chilling challenge of the machine. Nor were there any new pastures to go to, or a new city in which to start anew. Once again, the Patuas became mere smudges of dust, this time to fade away forever. But not quite so. For whatever little of their enormous output survives will continue to astonish, delight and remind future generations of these prolific and original artists and their breathtaking enterprise.

9 Cat with a fish in its mouth c. 1890



10 Krishna and two Naginis c. 1880

11 Narasimha destroying the demon Hiranyakasipu c.1835–40

12 The bhishti or water-carrier c.1840

13 Kurma, Vishnu's second incarnation c. 1865

14 Hanuman with Rama and Sita in his heart c. 1835-40

15 Hanuman in combat with Rvana c. 1860

16 Shiva as musician c. 1890

17 Yashoda and baby Krishna c. 1890

18 Matsya c. 1885

19 Rama battling with sons Lava and Kusha c.1880-85

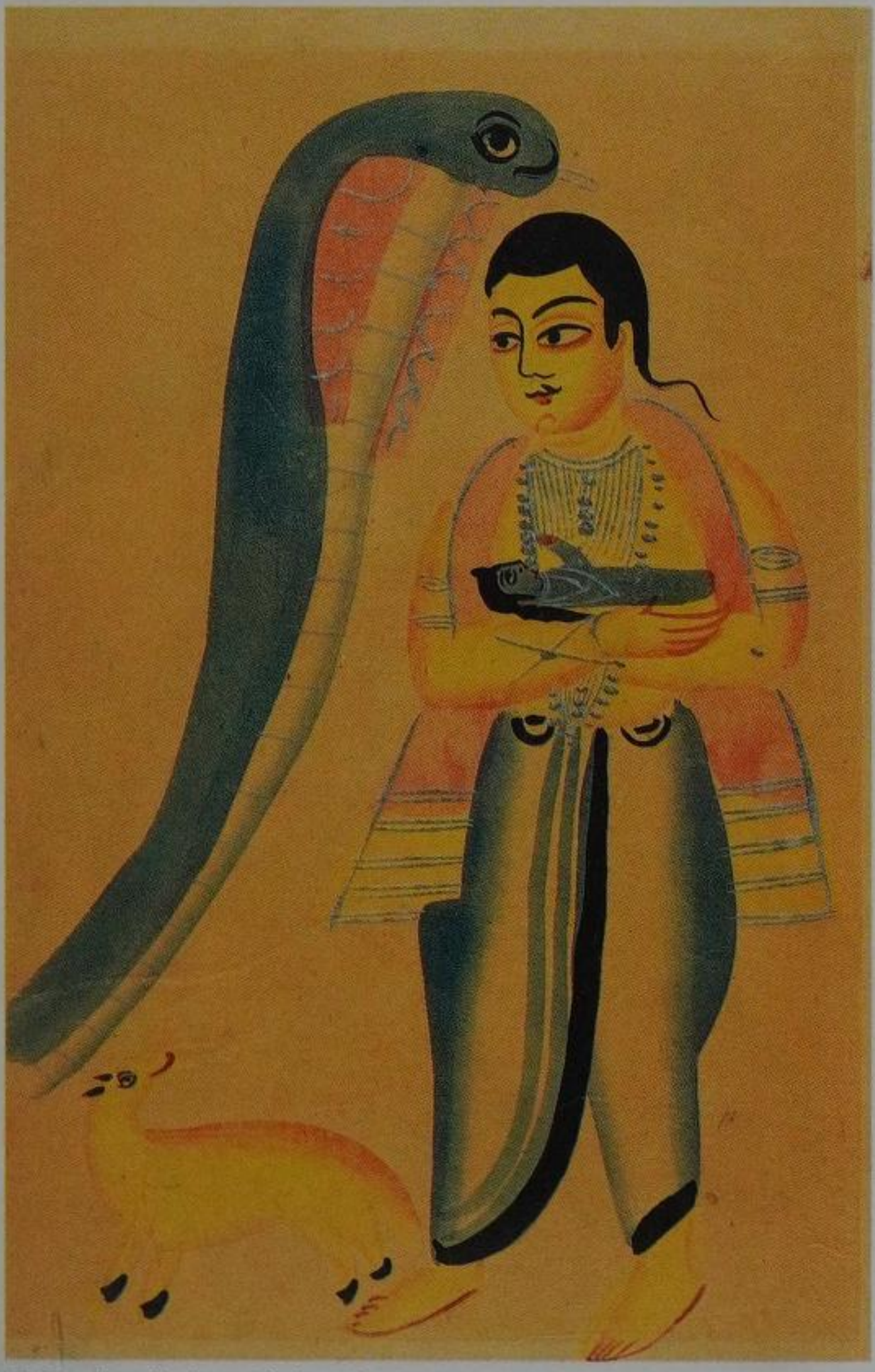
20 Cat with a fish in its mouth c. 1890

21 Krishna slaying Kansa by Kanai Lal Ghose c. 1925-30

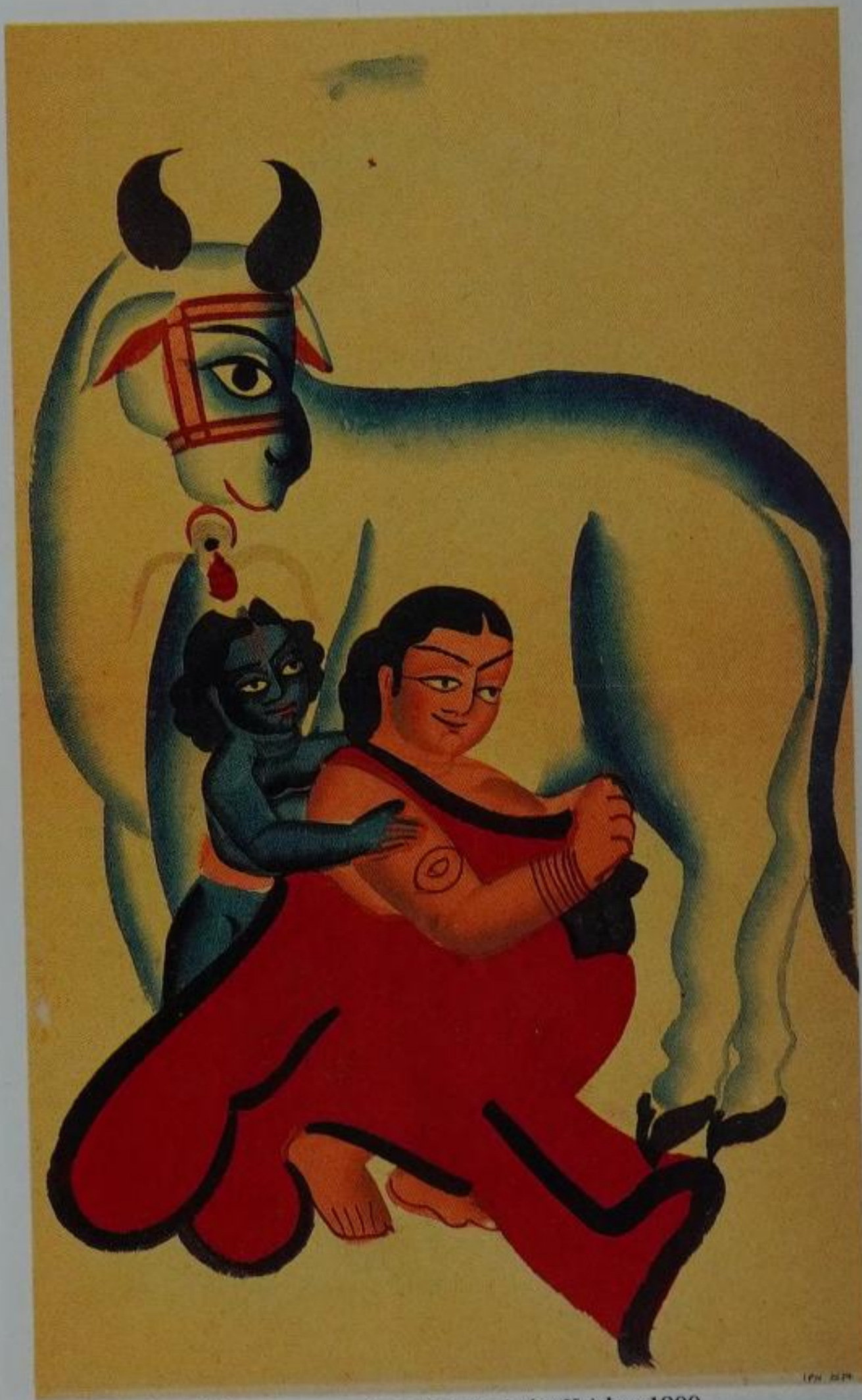
22 Courtesan and client carousing c.1880

23 Courtesan dressing her hair c. 1900

24 Nature Tamed c.1865-70



25 Vasudeva fleeing with the infant Krishna c. 1885



26 Yashoda milking a cow, assisted by the baby Krishna 1900

27 Bala Krishna c. 1850

28/29 Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannatha c. 1860

30 Krishna and Radha c. 1855-60

31 Krishna mollifying Radha c. 1865

32 Balarama c.1855-60

33 Mythological figure encircled by six archers c. 1890

34 A performer wrestling with a trained tiger c.1850

35 Two sepoys fighting c. 1830

36 Going for a walk c.1865-70

37 The elegant courtesan with her lap-dog of a Babu c. 1865-70

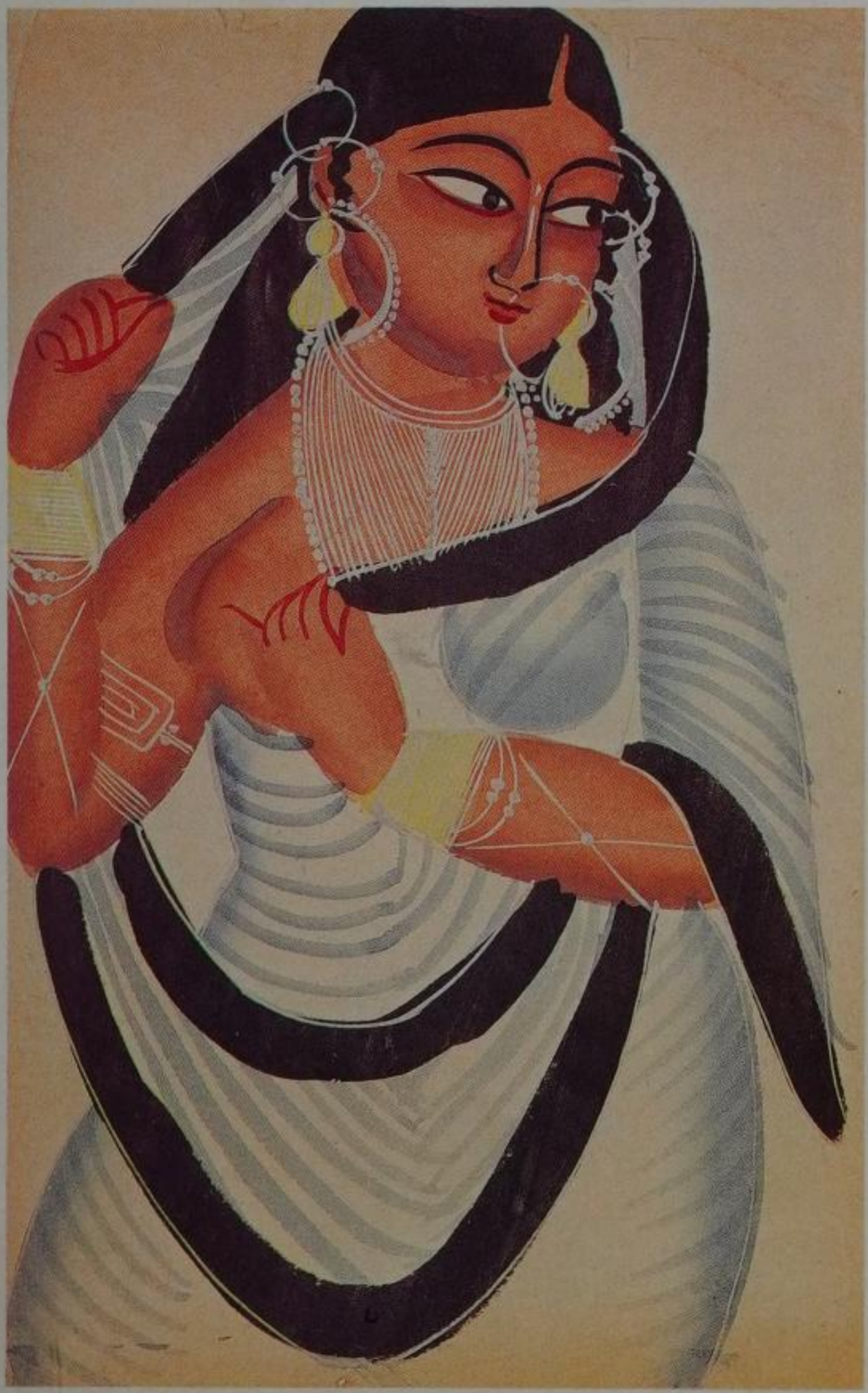
38 The cringing lover, unfinished study by Nibran Chandra Ghose c.1900

39 The musk rat Raja c.1880

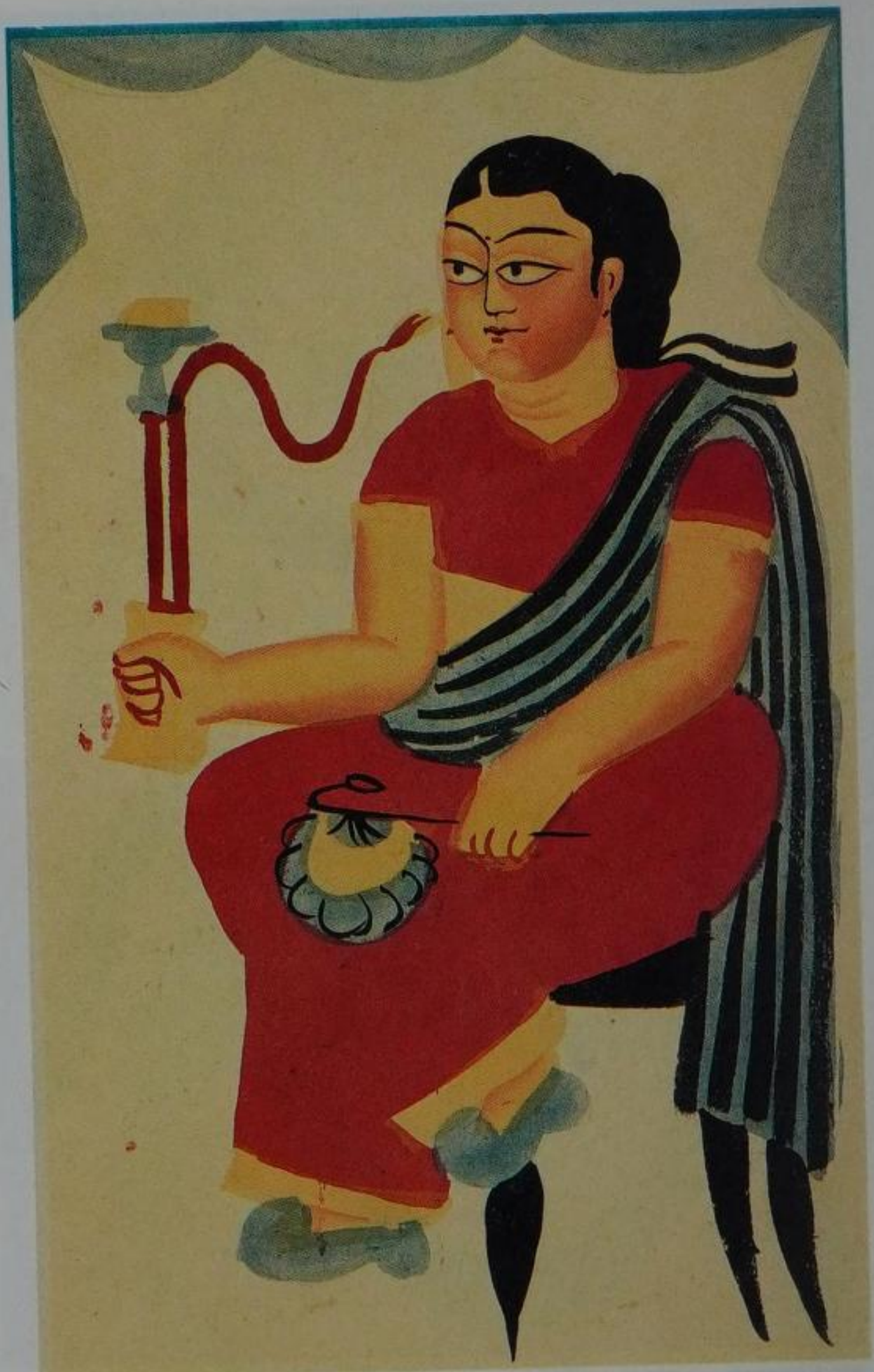
40 A Bengali gentleman playing tambura, by Becheram Das Pande c. 1865

41 Courtesan dressing her hair c. 1900

42 Courtesan with arms and legs crossed against a pillow c. 1865



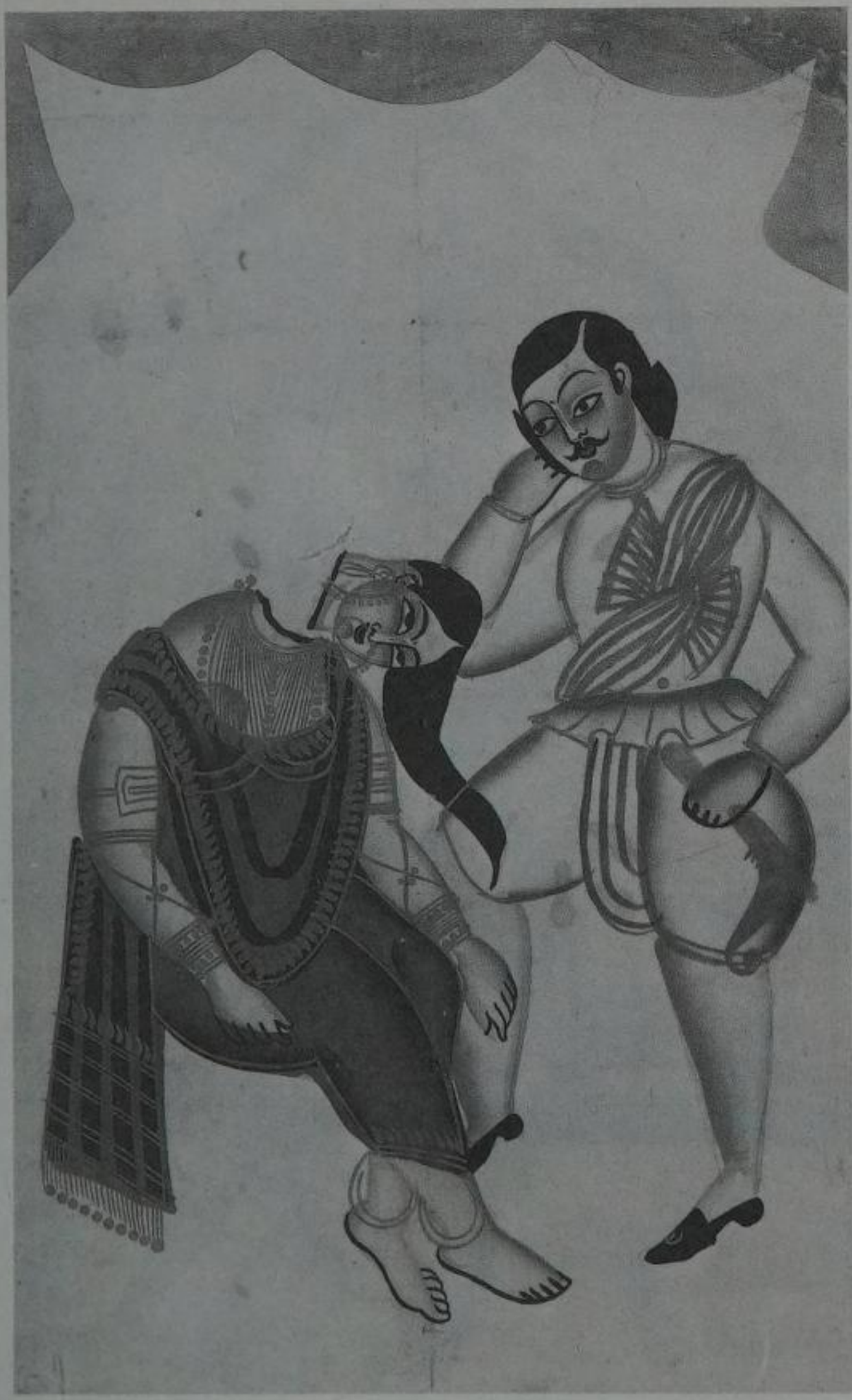
43 A Bengali courtesan c. 1890



44 A courtesan smoking a hookah c.1900

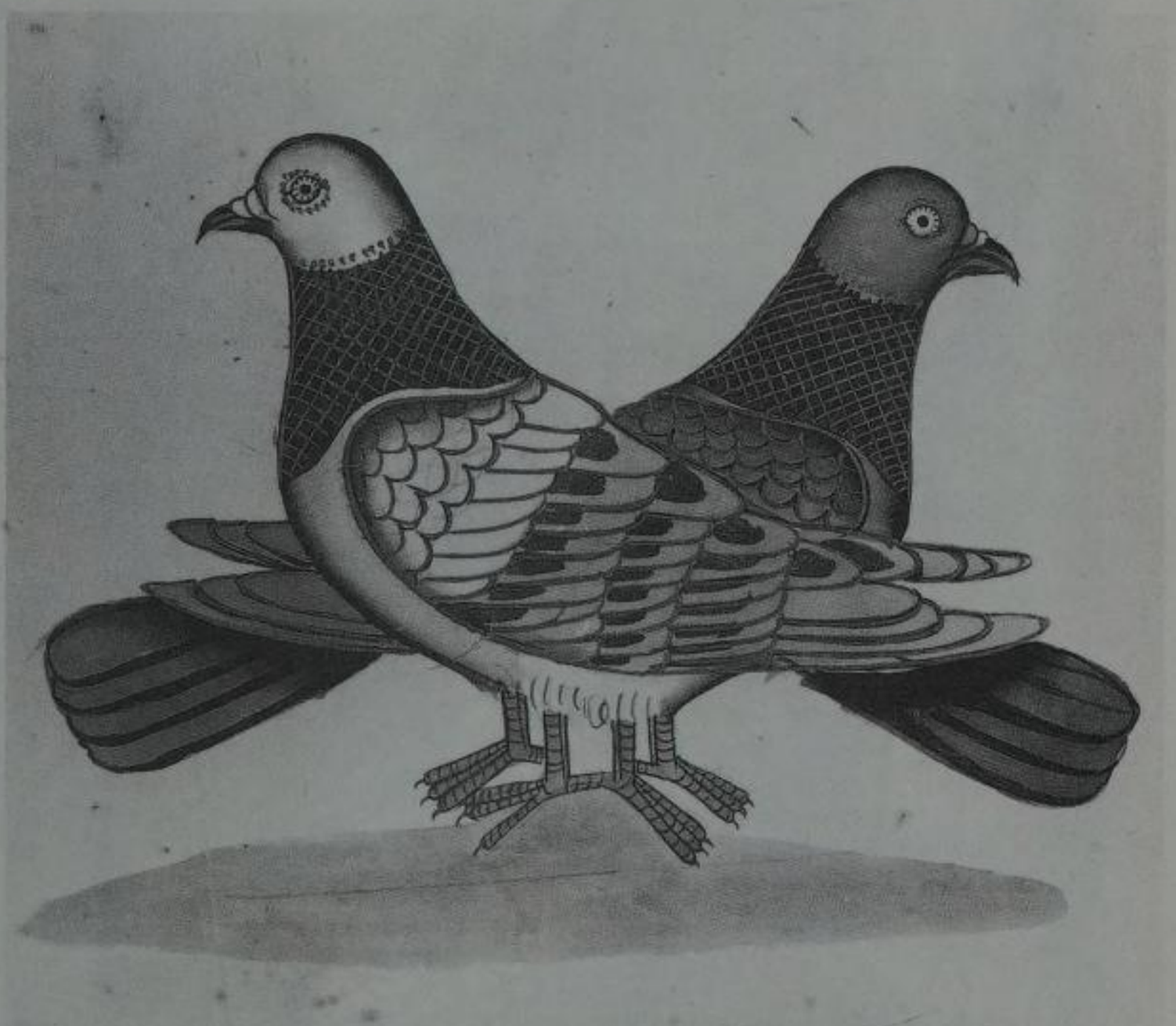
45 Elokeshi offers betel-leaf to the Mahant c.1890

46 Nabin learns of Elokeshi's adultery c.1875

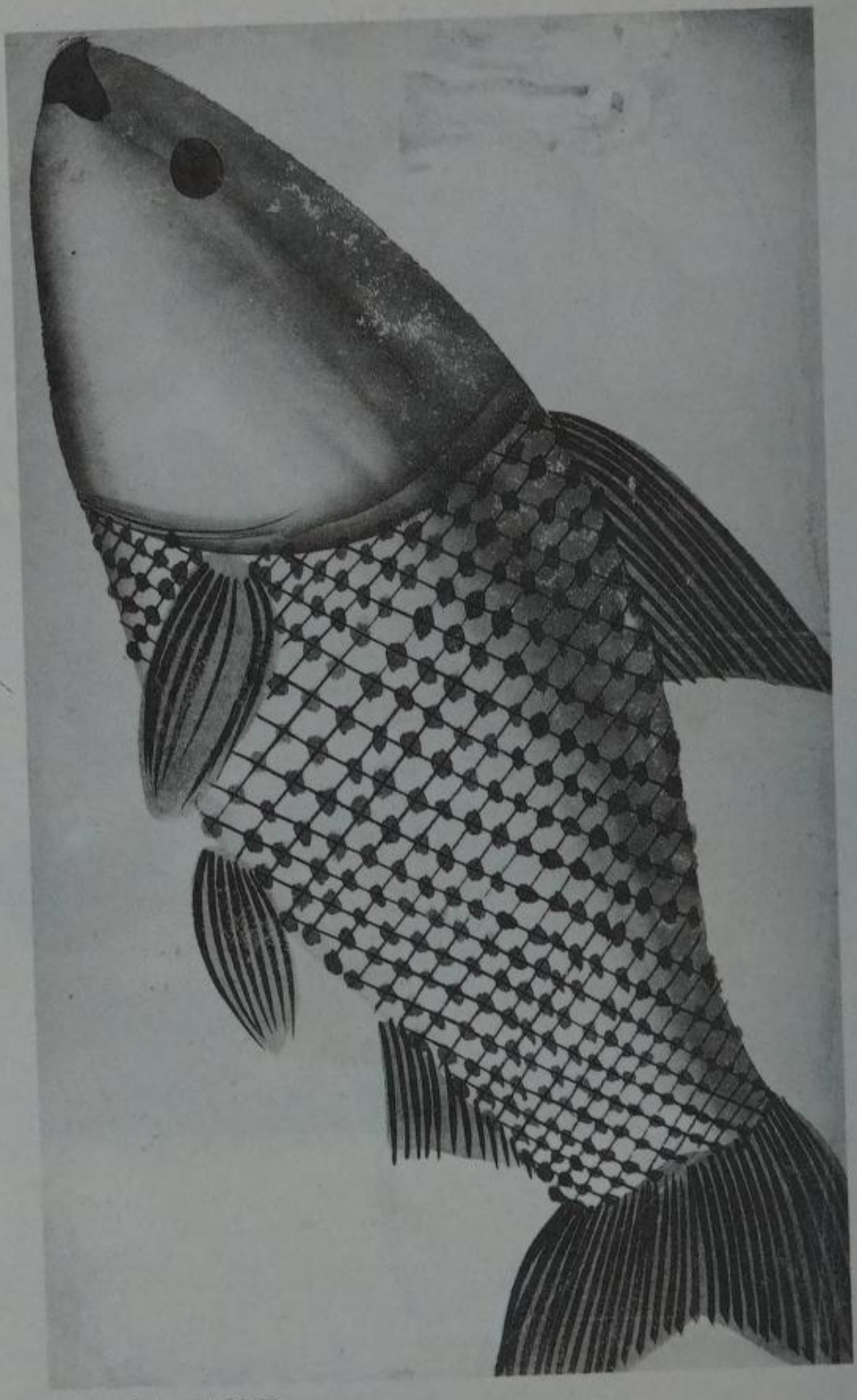


47 The ghastly murder c.1875

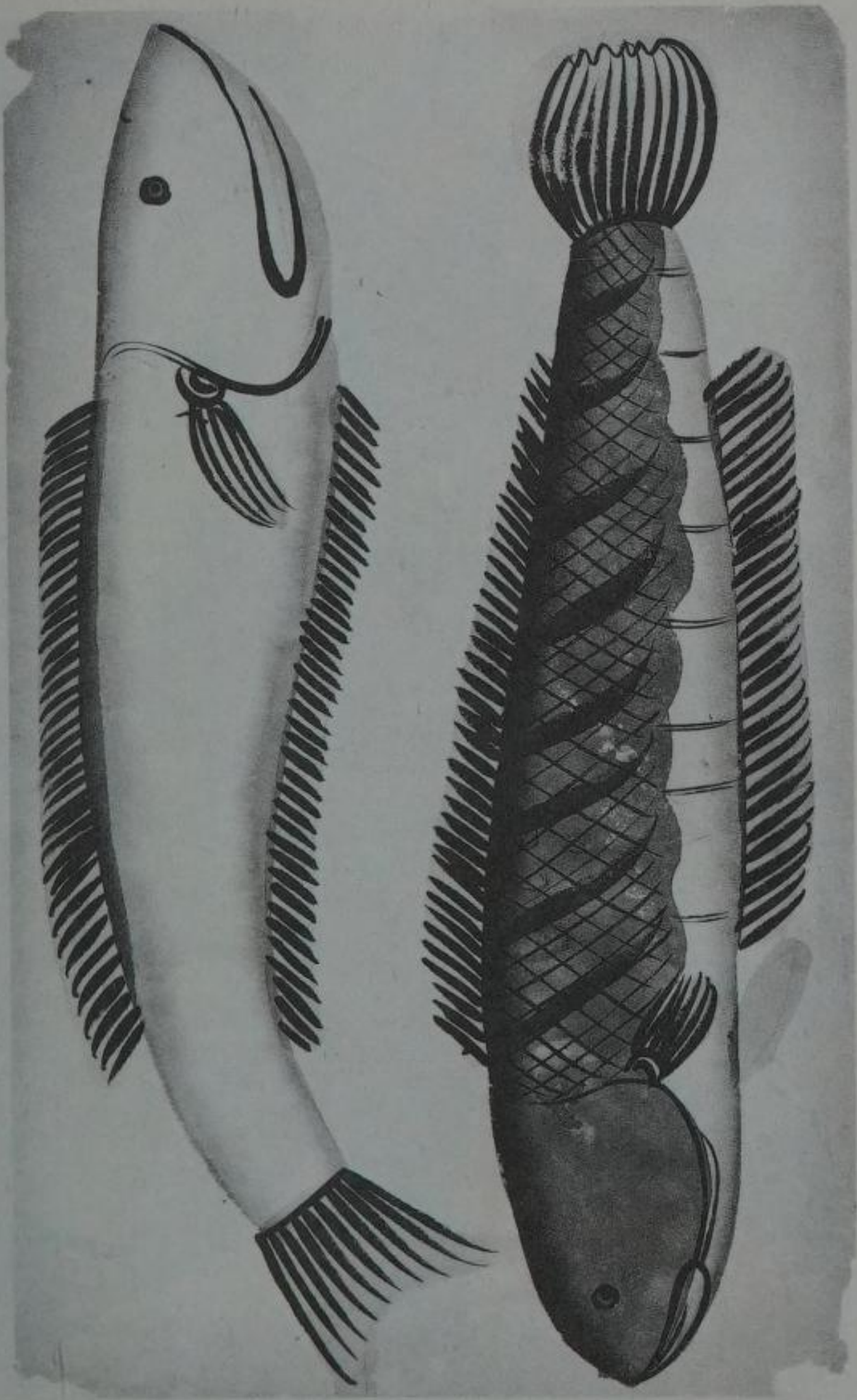
48 The pet parrot, by Kanai Lal Ghose c. 1920



49 A pair of pigeons c.1830



50 Rui fish c.1865-70

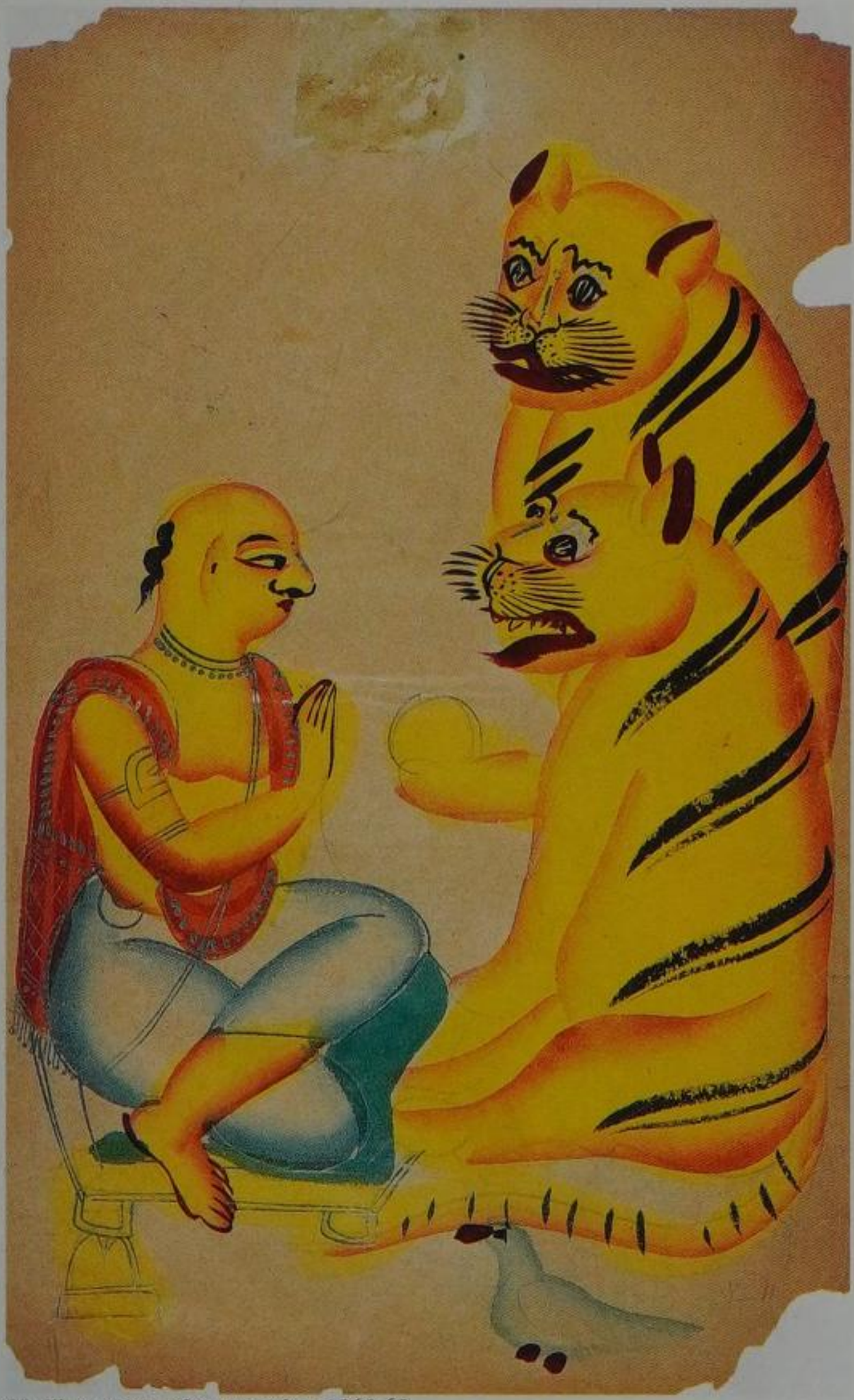


51 Two fishes c. 1880

52 Hand holding three fresh water prawns c. 1800

53 Ravana and Sita in the beak of Jatayu c. 1880

54 Priest with a bird on his head, by Nibran Chandra Ghosh c. 1900



55 Illustration of a proverb c. 1860-65

56 The philandering Babu and the musk rat party c. 1870

57 The courtesan and her sheepish Babu c. 1865-70

1 Kali c.1865
See Introduction, page 27.

2 Elokeshi's presentation to the Mahant in the temple c.1875
The first in a series of episodes that sealed the fate of the unfortunate young Elokeshi, wife of Nabin Chandra Bannerjee. This presentation is stage-managed by her sister, Muktakeshi and their family maid, Telibo. Elokeshi here is holding an offering of sweetmeats in one hand and meaningfully pulling the sari away from her face for the lustful high priest of the Shiva temple to have a good look. See Introduction, page 34.

3 Elokeshi with rose being fanned by the Mahant c.1875
Holding a rose courtesan-like, Elokeshi sits on a chair, receiving the Mahant's attentions who fans her with a *punkha*, a gesture reserved for a mistress. For in an Indian wedlock, it is invariably the wife who performs such a task.

4 An Englishman on an elephant shooting at a tiger c.1830
Normally, the hunter would be contained in a *howdah* on the back of the elephant and the elephant would be driven by a trained *mahaut*. The artist here edited the imagery ruthlessly and limited it simply to what he wanted to portray — the tiger, the elephant and the Englishman with a gun (naively held the wrong way around).

5 Cat with a prawn in its mouth c.1885

6 Courtesan sitting on a European-style chair and smoking a hookah c.1865

7 Courtesan with mirror putting a rose in her hair c.1875
The dot between her eyebrows tells us she is a Hindu lady.

8 Saraswati c.1860
Goddess of knowledge, music and the arts; sometimes daughter and consort of Brahma. She is usually shown seated on lotuses and playing a *vina*.

9 Cat with a fish in its mouth c.1890
Compare with fig. 5. Pressed for time as most of the Kalighat artits and their disciples usually were during their heyday, the author of this work perhaps forgot to give the cat those few revealing lines on the forehead.

10 Krishna and two Naginis c. 1880
Krishna standing on king cobra flanked by two supplicating female snake spirits.

11 Narasimha destroying the demon Hiranyakasipu c.1835-40
Narasimha, the man-lion, is the fourth incarnation of Vishnu. The boy prince Prahlada was a devotee of Vishnu and regarded him as omnipotent and omnipresent. This enraged his father, the demon king, Hiranyakasipu, who felt undermined by his son's misplaced devotion. He tried to put the boy to death and asked him if Vishnu was present even in the stone pillars of the royal palace. To save his devotee and to prove him right, Vishnu leapt out of the stone as a man-lion and ripped apart the demon king's belly.

12 The bhishti or water-carrier c.1840
A bhishti could be seen in Indian towns till recent times. Employed by the local municipality, he carried water in a goatskin slung from his shoulders and went from street to street, sprinkling water on the dusty and parched road surface. As he had to carry the skin of a dead animal, he belonged to the lowest, the untouchable class and he earned a pittance. It is curious, therefore, that the individual in this outstanding mid-nineteenth century representation should have been made so sumptuous a figure with a well-groomed beard, jewellery, headgear, embroidered skirt . . . even his goatskin has an elaborate pattern painted on it! He wears amulets on his biceps and has the markings of a twice-born on his forehead, which the bhishti was not. A case of artistic license endearingly exaggerated.

13 Kurma, Vishnu's second incarnation c.1865
The world was made and then came the Deluge and suddenly all was swallowed up by the sea of milk, including all that was dear and precious to the gods. Incarnated as a tortoise, Vishnu dived to the bottom of the sea where he let his back serve as the pivot for the great mountain Mandara. The gods and demons joined forces to churn the sea with him and the sea eventually disgorged all the precious objects, among them the water of life.

14 Hanuman with Rama and Sita in his heart c.1835-40
When questioned by Ravana about the whereabouts of Rama and Sita, Hanuman tore open his chest and said, 'Here. In my heart.'

15 Hanuman in combat with Ravana c.1860
The monkey god Hanuman not only possessed immense physical strength, he also had exceptional powers that defied ordinary laws of nature. He could fly, move mountains and change his own shape and form at will. While fighting with the mighty multi-headed and multi-armed Ravana, he acquired the proportions of a super giant.

16 Shiva as musician c.1890
The tireless divine wanderer and Lord of Dance, Shiva also has an ear for music. Sometimes he lays aside his trident and horn to strum on the sitar.

17 Yashoda and baby Krishna c.1890
Yashoda with a milking vessel held characteristically under her left arm, leads infant Krishna to a milking session.

18 Matsya c.1885
The fish, the first incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver. When the Great Deluge occurred in the first age, Matsya saved Manu, the first man, and mankind by towing the ark.

19 Rama battling with sons Lava and Kusha c.1880-85
The great victory over Ravana brought Raṃa little personal happiness. Back in Ayodhya as king, he had to deny Sita her rightful place as his wife and queen; there were doubts whether she had retained her virtue while a captive of the demon king. To prove her innocence, Sita walked through *agni*, fire, and emerged unscathed. Still Rama's subjects were not convinced and Sita, though pregnant, was sent into exile in the forest, where twins Lava and Kuha were born. The boys grew up in the forest, never knowing who their father was. Then one day they captured a beautiful horse. It belonged to their father who had turned it loose as part of an important royal sacrifice. Their refusal to restore it to its owner led to a battle between father and sons. In due course, Rama recognised the boys as his sons and all was well again.

20 Cat with a fish in its mouth c.1890
Line drawing

21 Young Krishna slaying Kansa c.1925-30
Pen and ink drawing by Kanai Lal Ghose

22 Courtesan and client carousing c.1880
Line drawing in black by Nibran Chandra Ghose

23 Courtesan dressing her hair c.1900
Line drawing in black

24 Nature tamed c.1865-70
The Kalighat Patuas believed in the principle of the female superiority in nature as demonstrated by Kali. Here a forceful-looking female, symbolising that principle, watches over a tiger and a cow drinking from the same vessel

while a cobra raises its hood behind them. To update the imagery, she is shown as sitting in a contemporary European-style chair, holding a spear.

25 Vasudeva fleeing with the infant Krishna c.1885
Vasudeva and Devaki were imprisoned in a palace-fortress with a river as a moat. When Krishna was born in the middle of a stormy night, gods conspired and the prison guards fell asleep. Immediately after, Vasudeva fled from there with the newly-born babe in his arms. Outside, a great storm whipped up and thunder roared, releasing great sheets of water form the sky. To protect the baby, Sheshnaga, the ten-headed king cobra rose from the turbulent river and spread its vast hood above father and son.

26 Yashoda milking a cow, assisted by the baby Krishna c.1900

27 Bala Krishna c. 1850
Baby Krishna crouching playfully on a divan. Painted blue, he wears his distinctive crown of peacock feathers.

28/29 Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannatha c.1860
In Bengal and neighbouring Orissa, Krishna is also referred to as Jagannatha, meaning literally Lord of the Universe. There is a tradition to paint Jagannatha in black in the company of his brother, Balabhadra, with their little sister, Subhadra, in the middle.

30 Krishna and Radha c.1855-60
Krishna was a legendary flute player — the notes from his bamboo flute are said to have entranced his milkmaid playmates, his favourite, Radha, among them. Here the two of them stand on lotuses, striking a stylised pose, while he plays the flute for her.

31 Krishna mollifying Radha c.1865
Radha, a married woman, was Krishna's favourite milkmaid. Illicit as it was, their romantic love for each other became an immensely popular subject for song, dance, poetry and painting. Always painted blue, the colour of the sky and infinity, Krishna humbles himself before Radha after a lovers' quarrel.

32 Balarama c.1855-60
Balarama was Krishna's elder brother. Both were reared by foster parents Nanda and Jashoda, sharing an idyllic childhood and youth in the forest of Brindaban. While Krishna is painted blue, Balarama is shown with a white complexion, carrying a deer horn. Fearless like his brother, he helped him slay many a demon. He was as much addicted to wine as his brother was to women.

33 Mythological figure in an oval surround encircled by six archers, taking aim at him c.1890

34 A performer wrestling with a trained tiger c.1850

35 Two sepoys fighting c.1830
The sepoy with the dagger wears a cap which looks more like a French *casquette* than headgears worn by East India Company sepoys. It could be that he was in fact from the nearby French garrison of Chandranagore (see Introduction, page 23). It could also be that his adversary was from a British regiment and this picture a pictorial representation of such a fight that actually took place in a Calcutta street.

36 Going for a walk c.1865-70
The courtesan with rose, leading her poodle of a Babu.

37 The elegant courtesan with her lapdog of a Babu c.1865-70

38 The cringing lover by Nibran Chandra Ghose
Unfinished study
Normally, only to his mother or to a respected older female relation, would an Indian male kneel in such a manner ot touch her feet. The only other member of the opposite sex he might thus submit himself to would be a courtesan he was obsessed with to an extent which removed every trace of his self-respect.

39 The musk-rat Raja c.1880
The Kalighat artists were fond of investing humble animals with high office. Here a rat has been elevated to the rank of a king. He is seen holding court of justice. The culprit brought before him is none other than the rats' arch enemy, the cat itself, caught red-handed with a rat or a mouse in its mouth and looking quite unrepentant. Two attendants guard it while a third sits astride it, waving a banner, proclaiming complete victory over their chief tormentor.

40 A Bengali gentleman playing tambura c.1865
by Becheram Das Pande
It was a sign of refinement among Bengali gentry to be able to play a musical instrument. Wearing earrings, jewellery, caste marks and a shawl, this cultivated young man tries his hand at the *tambura*.

41 Courtesan dressing her hair c.1900
Long flowing hair is a highly prized aspect of the Indian notion of feminine beauty. Here a young woman proudly holds tresses of her raven black hair after her toilet. Note the complementary movement of the black border of her sensuously red sari.

42 Courtesan with arms and legs crossed against a pillow c.1865

43 A Bengali courtesan c.1890
By holding one end of the sari over her head and laying bare her left breast at the same time, the young woman successfully combines the Indian ideal of feminine modesty with coquetry essential to her trade and lifestyle.

44 A courtesan smoking a hookah c.1900
Smoking among women in India is taboo. Like drinking, it is in direct contrast to the cherished view of Indian womanhood — femininity, modesty and virtuousness. But there are women who smoke. They either belong to society's uppermost echelons, the aristocracy, or its lowest crusts. Courtesans and ladies of their calling, however, are exempt from such social structures and have been given license to smoke as a sign of their independence.

45 Elokeshi offers betel-leaf to the Mahant c.1890

46 Nabin learns of Elokeshi's adultery c.1875
By placing an umbrella under Nabin's arm and a travelling bag in his hand, the artist is telling us that he has just arrived from a journey.

47 The ghastly murder c.1875

48 The pet parrot c.1920
by Kanai Lal Ghose
A green parrot, common all over the sub-continent, is chained up in the outline of a ribless cage. Parrots as pets have always been popular in India.

49 A pair of pigeons c.1830
Based on natural history drawings along the Company lines, as had been popular since the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

50 Rui fish c.1865-70

51 Two fishes c.1880

52 Hand holding three fresh water prawns c.1880

53 Ravana and Sita in the beak of Jatayu c.1880
Jatayu was the king of vultures and, like Hanuman, a great devotee of Rama. When Ravana abducted Sita and carried her off in his flying chariot, Jatayu engaged him in an aerial battle to rescue her. Unsuccessful, he fell to earth, mortally wounded. It was from him that Rama found out about his wife's fate.

54 Priest with a bird on his head c.1890
by Nibran Chandra Ghosh
The vertical marks on the priest's forehead indicate that he is a follower of Vishnu. That a bird came and perched on his clean-shaven head is perhaps suggestive of the fact that often such mendicants were seen as figures of fun.

55 Illustration of a proverb c.1860-65
There are two conflicting interpretations of this baffling picture. One is that 'you cannot propitiate a tiger by prayer.' The other says — 'before a truly godly spirit even the wildest beasts of the forest are tame'. Two fully-grown tigers holding offerings make obeisance to a holy man. Note a meek dove in the foreground bearing its own offering of a fruit in its beak.

56 The philandering Babu and the musk rat at a party c.1870
An illustration to a local proverb
A rose in one hand and a walking stick in the other, the elegantly attired Babu leaves us in little doubt as to the nature of his chosen destination — the abode of his inamorato to whose fatal charms he has already succumbed. The exaggerated black moth or bat flapping its wings before him tells us that his liaison is shady and ephemeral. The rodents in the theatre-like squares in the background — complete with a stage curtain — have gone haywire in his house in his absence. They are dancing and waving banners and pounding on drums. The Babu may look a proper dandy in flashy, and possibly borrowed clothes, but his home now is ruined and good enough only for a party for the rats.

57 The courtesan and her sheepish Babu c.1865-70
See Introduction, page 33.

58 A Bengali courtesan c.1865
The plentiful jewellery around her person informs us that she is a courtesan of class. Seated on a courtly divan, she is fondly nursing a pet peacock with a look of longing on her face as she awaits her lover.

59 Water snake swallowing a fish c.1875
An illustration of an old Bengali proverb.
Besides being an exquisite study of the water snake, the picture graphically illustrates what it is like being caught in the jaws of debauchery — there is no escape.

The Front Cover: Ganesha c.1900
Ganesha or Ganpati is the god of prosperity and the Remover of Obstacles, one of the most popular Hindu deities. He is the son of Shiva and Parvati but he is said to have been fashioned by Parvati alone. Annoyed at being disturbed by Shiva while she was at her toilet, she rubbed herself and created Ganesha from the essence which came off and placed him at her palace gate as a guard. Challenged by Shiva to step aside, Ganesha stood his ground and was promptly beheaded. Parvati was so overcome with grief that a search party was immediately dispatched to find a replacement for her son's head. The first creature it came upon was a wandering elephant whose head was separated from its body and given to Ganesha. While this is the commonly held belief as to how he acquired his remarkable appearance, Ganesha, like Kali and some other Hindu deities, is rooted in the pre-Aryan tribal society given to the worship of animals and jungle spirits. He rides a rat and is always shown red, his colour.

Poster: Hanuman fighting with Ravana c.1840
The Ramayana is one of the two great Hindu epics (the Mahabharata is the other). It tells the story of Rama, seventh incarnation of god Vishnu, and the abduction of his wife Sita by Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka, and the great war with Ravana that followed. With the help of his ardent ally Hanuman, a mighty monkey chieftain renowned for his physical strength, Rama defeated Ravana and rescued Sita.

Poster: The Jackal Raja's court c.1870
A witty illustration to the Indian saying that in the jungle even a jackal can be a king. The picture is made up of two telling sequences. In the top half is the lordly creature sitting cross-legged on a divan complete with an enormous cushion. In attendance are two liveried lackeys wearing pearl collars and belts. Standing upright like humans, one holds the royal *chattri* over the Raja's head while the other carries his hookah. This section of the picture establishes his status.

In the lower half we see him seated stiffly in a European chair. Another attendant in a British sailor's uniform has brought forth two hapless animals, perhaps foxes, arested for some misdemeanour. The jackal Raja is about to pass judgement on them.

Poster: Courtesan with mirror putting a rose in her hair c.1875
The dot between her eyebrows tells us she is a Hindu lady.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum:
Picture numbers 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28/29, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 38, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 53. The postcard and three posters included in the box.

The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford;
Picture numbers 5, 24, 30, 32, 37, 50, 51, 52, 55, 56, 57, 59.

Copyright The British Library:
Picture numbers 2, 3, 6, 10, 13, 21, 39, 40, 42, 54, 58.
The Front Cover.

Copyright British Museum:
Picture number 8.